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NOVEMBER 1976

THE MIRAGE

A NOVELLA BY MICHELE ARVIZU

CREDITS

Published by: Beverly Volker & Nancy Kippax

Edited by: Martha Bonds, Susan Dorsey, Leslie Fish
and Pat Stall

Artwork by: Leslie Fish

Poetry by: "Pete" Kaup

Cover Design by: Russ Volker

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All comments concerning the story should be sent to:

G. Michele Arvizu
1127 Ash Avenue
Tempe, AZ 85281

All other comments should be sent to:

CONTACT
5657 UTRECHT RD
BALTIMORE, MD 21206

PUBLISHERS' PAGE

We wish to acknowledge special thanks to Jacqueline Lichtenberg for her recommendation of this story. It was because of this that the initial "contact" with Michele was made that resulted in the joint effort you have before you.

We would also like to thank Vicki Kirlin for her kindness and cooperation in releasing the manuscript to us, when it was originally submitted to BERENGARIA.

The story of "The Mirage" is a compelling, and at times, all too realistic approach to a possible future for Kirk and Spock--At least, it is one author's interpretation of it. The decision to publish the novella, despite some rather negative reactions against doing so, was made, not so much on whether or not we as publishers agreed personally with the author's speculation, but rather, whether we felt it was a valid interpretation of one facet of the Kirk/Spock relationship. Has the author developed her plot, defined her characters, presented a well-written theory? We feel she has.

CONTACT is dedicated to exploring all aspects of the K/S relationship and various fan-authors' interpretations of them, albeit, they may not reflect our own.

"The Mirage" is presented by itself because of its length and because we felt that its nature was too intense, its emotional impact too profound, to be included in a regular issue along with other relationship stories. Also, it is in direct conflict with our own interpretation of the future of Kirk and Spock in our PHASE II series and we felt that one would tend to cancel the other.

It is not necessary for you to "like" THE MIRAGE, for it is indeed a disturbing and haunting story of what could happen, but we hope you will accept it for what it was intended to be - the author's proposal of a possible future none of us like to think about.

WE ARE ONE...WE REACH,

*Bev
and
Nancy*

I.

Captain James Kirk, First Officer Spock and Ship's Surgeon McCoy are not the men they once were.

Decrepit and antiquated, the three aged men stand staring and blinking at each other in disbelief. Captain Kirk's hands tremble spontaneously.

"You've got to keep working, Bones," he implores. "You can't give up till you find an antidote. My ship is being blown to pieces!"

McCoy's white head shakes with anger and his eyes blaze. He too is trembling.

"Damn it, get off my back, Jim. I'm doing the best I can. It all takes time!"

Mr. Spock stands a little stooped but for the most part outwardly unchanged. He is on the edge of nervousness, an unorthodox state for a Vulcan, but his voice betrays no such condition.

"Dr. McCoy, time is the one element we do not have in abundance."

McCoy scowls at the stoic Vulcan and goes back to his laboratory.

Leonard McCoy's laboratory holds the only hope for the ENTERPRISE. He and Nurse Chapel work feverishly, running test after test, in the hope of discovering a cure for their deadly dilemma. The three of them are aging at a fantastic rate, but the pounding in their ears tells them that the next five to ten minutes are critical for the ship. A whiteheaded Captain Kirk virtually moans with each hit.

About their heads, the U.S.S. ENTERPRISE, the finest ship in Starfleet, shakes and lurches under the attack of a Romulan destroyer. On the orders of Commodore Stocker, who has relieved James Kirk of his command, the ENTERPRISE is trespassing in Romulan neutral territory, a serious breach of a recent Federation/Romulan treaty. In retaliation, the alien destroyer is bombarding the starship mercilessly.

Nothing more than a Starfleet pencil-pusher, Commodore Stocker sits in Kirk's command chair on the bridge in panic, completely incapable and unqualified except by rank to make any sort of command decision.

The bridge crew, disciplined through countless crises, still works efficiently, even under these intense pressures, but to a stranger like Stocker, the bridge at this moment looks as if pandemonium has long since set in. The helmsman,

Lt. Sulu, issues current Romulan positions and requests evasive maneuvering instructions; Engineer Scott warns firmly at first, then more vehemently, that his engines and the shields that protect the ship cannot further stand the constant pounding of the attacks; Communications Officer Uhura relates to the Commodore that she cannot raise Starfleet Command and that instructions from that source are not forthcoming. To Stocker, all seem to speak at once.

Suddenly, like a man risen from the dead, James Kirk, vibrant and able again, bursts onto the bridge. At the last second, McCoy's results have reversed the aging process.

Though they try not to show it, the crew is much relieved; though he tries not to show it, Commodore Stocker is ecstatic. He gladly relinquishes the command chair to Kirk who, seconds after hearing the crew's reports, begins issuing a complex set of pinpoint instructions to Sulu and Ensign Chekov, the navigator. Before any of them realize it, the ENTERPRISE is out of Romulan firing range and back in neutral space.

The crisis is over.

"That Stocker, he was a fool. He was perfectly willing to jeopardize the lives of 430 people just because he had to go by 'the book'. Regulations. We didn't always go by 'the book' back in those days, did we, Spock?"

"Not all the time, sir."

"It's hard to believe that little episode happened so very, many years ago."

"True, sir."

"Spock, my friend, you look fine. And how do I look?"

"You look fine too."

"Vulcans don't make good liars. I look terrible and you know it."

Admiral James T. Kirk sat in a large overstuffed lounge, his thin legs and slippered feet resting on an old-fashioned ottoman. A tailored blue robe made of soft, warm material covered his frail body, and a dark blue blanket laid across his lap. Only the gold braid that decorated his robe was a clue that this elderly man had high rank in the military. When he talked, a shock of grey hair sometimes fell across his face, and when it did, he smoothed it back with a gnarled hand. Whenever the Admiral had visitors, he liked nothing better than to reminisce.

"Sometimes I get awfully discouraged, Spock," he muttered with a sigh. "I'll tell you something else, I surely get bored

sitting here all day, day after day."

Where Admiral Kirk sat all day was his own personal quarters on Starbase Nine. The rooms were airy and spacious, with great glass windows and walls that let in daylight and breezes at night. The solid walls were covered with awards and personal mementos collected by Kirk throughout a glorious career of commands.

"Oh, they take care of me pretty well here, don't get me wrong," the old man continued. "There isn't a wish that isn't fulfilled." He sighed again as he looked at his hands. They were twisted and fixed by an ancient Earth disease called arthritis. "You'd think they would have discovered a cure for this by now..." His voice trailed off.

Seated before him was his former First Officer, a Vulcan called Spock. The two men carried an intense bond in their hearts for one another. Kirk would be quick to confirm this, while Spock would only conclude that their long relationship had been maintained solely for Starfleet expediency.

The Vulcan sat straight in his chair, his stony expression changing little throughout the conversation. He was a tall, austere figure who normally spoke without a hint of emotion to color his thoughts. The clothing he wore was not a military uniform, for Spock had left Starfleet within the past two years to devote his full energies to scientific experimentation on one of the Rigel planets.

"Admiral, sir, may I make an inquiry?" the Vulcan asked.

Kirk looked distressed. "Spock, please. You don't have to go by 'the book' here, do you? The word 'Admiral' sounds so strange coming from you. I would be pleased if you would call me 'Captain'."

Spock relaxed. "Thank you, Captain. I, too, would prefer it. And now to my inquiry."

"Oh, yes, yes. Go on. Ask away."

"I am wondering why you asked me to visit you. You did summon me, did you not? Is there something I can do for you, something you need?" His tone was as neutral as his expression; only the words reflected his concern.

"Oh, yes, the reason for my asking you to come here. You would want a reason, wouldn't you, Spock?..." The Captain's mind began to drift to the past again. "Spock, do you remember that time when the two of us were captured by the Klingons and--" He cut himself off after noticing Spock's indifference. "Aren't you interested in reminiscing...just a little?"

"It serves no purpose, Captain."

Though his mother was human, Spock acknowledged no ties with her people except through his long association with James Kirk. He had remained to this day devoted to the Vulcan philosophy of non-emotion and logic, and only the Captain knew him well enough to actually see through the alien demeanor for an occasional glimpse of a human reaction.

Kirk looked small against his large chair. He had lost so much weight that the blue robe hung on him like rags on a scarecrow. He felt tired and useless and despondent. His mind still retained its clarity and his sense of humor but this thing called "old age" had attacked his body harshly, left him shriveled and trembling, yet because of Vulcan physiology, it would not grip Spock for many years to come.

"Captain," resumed Spock. He leaned over and touched Kirk's arm. "The reason for my coming here."

"Yes, Spock, I know, I know. It's just that you remind me so much...so much." Kirk's expression was sad. "I had no specific reason, Mr. Spock. Just a hunch, that's all..."

"Sir?" The Vulcan did not understand.

"No reason in particular. Just to see you, that's all. You're not anxious to go, are you?" The old man didn't want that.

"No, sir. I was just curious. I have not seen you for some time, but I was planning a visit later on in the year." Spock remembered the last time he had seen the Captain. It was a time of tragedy and grief.

"And tell me, are you shocked by my appearance?" Kirk questioned, his clear eyes searching his friend's stark face.

Spock answered without hesitation. "Frankly, Captain, yes, I am."

Kirk slapped the arm of the chair with the flat of his hand. Spock lifted an eyebrow.

"Well, so am I, damn it! I don't like it, not one bit. In the last year, I've really fallen apart. They say it's incurable. Something about spontaneous degeneration brought on by years of stress. Bunk! I thrive on stress!" He sank back in his chair, a little alarmed by his own outburst.

"Is there nothing they can do to deter it, Captain?" came the emotionless reply.

"If there were, don't you think they'd be doing it?" Kirk snapped. His irritation was obvious.

Spock was not used to this type of behavior from his



Captain, but then he saw Kirk's sickly condition. The warm, tanned skin was gone, replaced by pale, ashen alabaster so delicate as to appear translucent. Deep wrinkles creased the once handsome face, and his hands were in constant motion from uncontrollable tremblings. The golden-brown hair had long since turned grey. Only the eyes remained clear and twinkling like always, through some inexplicable amnesty of nature.

Kirk changed the subject. "Tell me, how do you like commanding an entire science project?"

"It is very different from what I expected," Spock responded. "I do not command it, it commands me. Directing the activities of fifty emotional humans is not easy for me. Captain, I have much appreciated your many attempts to coach me on the subject."

Kirk listened in amusement.

"But, Mr. Spock, you are the top administrator and your fifty scientists are not emotional all of the time, are they? Certainly you and they work smoothly in general and achieve results regarding the project." Spock missed the humor.

"My scientific participation is very limited."

"I suppose your signature is needed on a lot of memoranda," Kirk concluded, knowingly.

"Exactly, Captain."

The old man sighed in sympathy. "I understand your position. It sounds very much like being an Admiral. Lots of glory--no action."

"Sir," Spock interrupted him. "You were an extremely active administrator. No one person in Starfleet has done more to keep peace in the galaxy than yourself."

"Well, I didn't last very long, did I?" The old man's gaze dropped to the folded hands in his lap. "You know, after Jen and the children were killed, there didn't seem to be much point to it..."

The mention of the deceased family Spock had hardly known made the Vulcan uneasy. He was not good at consoling others and the old man was close to tears now. All Spock could do was sit near his friend, his eyes cast downward. His incapability to function constructively at times like these left him drained.

"Would you care to talk about it, Captain?" he finally thought to say.

Kirk sobbed once quietly, then quickly pulled himself together. "You saw it; you were there."

"I saw the accident and I was at their funeral," Spock concurred. "But I hardly knew your family."

Kirk looked gravely at Spock.

"Why is that, Spock? I invited you to visit several times. Would you still have felt out of place...even with me?"

"I have visited you, Captain, several times in recent years. And we talk often."

"Yes, but never when my family was around."

Spock lowered his head and remained silent.

"It's all right, Spock. I understand."

In fact, Kirk did understand Spock's unwillingness to become involved personally with Earth people. As a Vulcan, he could never really fit into human family life. "Still," Kirk went on, "I wish you could have known Jen a little better. She was quite a girl--too good for me, really. It took her years to get me to accept that damn promotion." The Admiral glanced at Spock, a glint of the old smile playing on his lips. "I couldn't be married to two women, could I?"

The reference to an inanimate object such as Kirk's ship as female never failed to strike the Vulcan as a curiosity. It was so like humans to emotionalize situations. After dealing with them his whole life, their caprice with emotion still fascinated him.

"She would have liked you, Spock," the old man continued, a dreamy expression crossing his face. "She did like you. I think Jen was always disappointed that I could never get you to visit. She wanted very badly to have the children meet you. She even asked me once if you would be offended if the boys called you 'Uncle Spock'."

Spock was deeply moved, though his demeanor did not betray him.

"An old Earth custom, Captain?" he asked simply.

"Yes, a very old Earth custom."

"No, sir. I would not have been offended."

Kirk sighed. "Well, it wasn't meant to be, that's all. My wife and boys died instantly. They never knew that the officer in charge of the starliner that collided with theirs was dead drunk at the helm. What a waste. I don't have much now except my pension from Starfleet...and a lot of memories."

A distant look fell over his features before he said, "Don't get old, Spock. You won't like it."

Before the Vulcan could respond, a shrill beeping sound interrupted their conversation. The telecommunicator, a small console perhaps a foot square, sat on a table to the right of the Admiral. He reached over wearily and pressed a button. A female voice interjected.

"Admiral James T. Kirk, I have an interbase call for you from Starbase Ten Medical Chief John Curtis. May I connect you, sir?" The voice was efficient and sterile.

"This is Kirk. Go ahead, Starbase Ten."

Immediately the image of a man's face appeared on the little screen. Middle-aged with thinning brown hair, he was dressed in a tan tunic-suit with a Starfleet medical insignia pinned to the left shoulder. He looked tired and a bit nervous.

"Jim, this is Curt. How are you feeling today?" The doctor tried to sound cheerful.

Kirk fell limply back in his chair, his hands aching. "Feel? I feel terrible, Curt. What are you medical whizkids going to do about it?"

Dr. Curtis looked dismayed.

"Jim, cut the jokes. I have something quite serious to discuss with you." Through the two-way receiver the doctor finally saw a glimpse of someone else in the room. "Oh, I see you're not alone, Jim. I'll place another call later on in the day as I wish to confer with you privately."

Spock attempted to rise. "I can wait outside, Captain." Kirk motioned for him to remain in his chair.

"That won't be necessary," he whispered to Spock, then turned to the screen and repeated, "That won't be necessary, Curt. This is Mr. Spock, my former First Officer and my good friend. Any trade secrets you have to disclose are safe with him."

"It's not that type of thing, Jim."

The doctor looked distressed. Maybe it was better that Jim Kirk was not alone when he received the news.

"I have heard Jim speak of you often, Mr. Spock. I am honored to make your acquaintance."

Spock nodded in acknowledgement. "I, too, am honored, Doctor."

Curtis turned his attention back to Kirk as the old man grew impatient. "Well, Curt, I know you're a busy man, and all this idle chit-chat isn't like you at all. Why don't you just tell me what's on your mind."

"All right, Jim, all right." It was difficult to know where to start. "I have the results of your last medical examination in front of me...." He could not go on.

Kirk sensed the doctor's anxiety. "That bad," he said calmly. The room suddenly became very quiet. "Look, Curt, you and I have been friends for a long time. You know I can take it. Go on, give it to me straight."

The doctor took a deep breath. "You're dying, Jim..."

"We all are, Doctor," the Admiral snapped.

Spock could see Curtis wince. "You're going to die soon."

"How soon?"

You're not making this very easy for me, Jim, Curtis thought to himself.

"Six, maybe eight weeks. You've been failing a bit more every day. We've tried everything, Jim, you know that, don't you?"

"Are you sure there's nothing you can do?" Kirk asked weakly, echoing Spock's earlier inquiry.

"Nothing more. I'm truly sorry."

Nobody knew what to say.

"Well, that's that," Kirk mumbled. "It's all right, Curt. I know you've done your best for me. Really." He sighed, struggling for control. "What do you suggest I do now?"

The image on the little screen flickered as if it, too, were unsure of itself.

"You've had a good life, Jim, a glorious life. You've always been your own man. Nobody could ask for more than that. All you can do now is spend the time you've got left trying to accept this ending as having dignity."

"It doesn't," Kirk said bitterly.

The doctor summed it up. "It does, if you make it."

Kirk closed his eyes as he flicked off the little box. He was numb.

The Vulcan Spock had been sitting stiff and quiet taking

this all in. There had been other deaths in his life, but none, not even his mother's would have the precise effect on him as this one would. Admiral James T. Kirk had been friend, brother, confidant, ally, even idol to Spock through most of his adult life. The Vulcan comprehended thoroughly that Kirk's death originated from natural progressions--still, suddenly, out of nowhere, his Captain was being taken from him, almost yanked viciously from his life. Momentarily he realized the true reason for his being called to Starbase Nine. Of course...for a last visit. The Captain's hunch.

Like a sleepwalker, the Vulcan let his mind roll out and away from his immediate control back to the past. He recalled his fierce loyalty to Christopher Pike, the first Captain of the ENTERPRISE. Spock thought at the time that no man would ever capture his respect above Captain Pike. Respect and loyalty were two things the Vulcan would always have to give his current captain, even to the two men he served following Captain Kirk. Nevertheless, as the years sped forward in his mind, the impetuous image of James T. Kirk commanded Spock's total fidelity. In Kirk, nobility reigned supreme. In Kirk, Spock found a specialness more special than his own. Today their bond was more than loyalty, more than respect. It was a communion of minds linked by mutual experience and kindred spirits.

Surely, the Vulcan considered, there is a way to prevent this death. The galaxy is vast and there are a hundred civilizations that could harbor the answer. In these times, nature can be circumvented and tricked. Death can be fooled into dropping its present quarry and perhaps chasing off after another. I must find a way out of this dilemma. I have always said that Vulcans are superior, and now I must be. The Captain...we...can not be destroyed.

"Spock, are you all right?" the old man asked with concern. He had been watching the Vulcan sit trance-like for a full five minutes.

"Captain!" Spock leaned forward in his chair and took Kirk by the shoulders. "Are you all right?"

The old man smiled sadly. "I'm sorry I made you listen to all that. You're taking it pretty hard, aren't you?" His insight into his former First Officer's mind was amazing, but Spock quickly regained his composure, embarrassed to have Kirk suspect him of emotional behavior.

"Captain, what Dr. Curtis has told you is true. Death must be accepted with dignity when the time comes. I simply do not recognize that the time has come."

Kirk's mouth opened in surprise.

"What are you saying, Spock?"

"I submit, Captain, that there are many ways to stave off death from natural causes."

Kirk shrugged in dismissal. "It's a pretty arrogant individual who can defy death when it's already sitting on his chest."

"Captain, please listen to me. You have been party to a great number of so-called 'galactic impossibilities' in your career. You have witnessed with your own eyes beings of superior mental capabilities, and machines--large and small--capable of incredible feats and possessing incredible powers. You have seen dead men raised up again--remember Nomad and Engineer Scott? My point is that you have seen a thousand wonders in your travels, and you have understood that they exist everywhere in the galaxy. Please allow me to find one that will help you."

"Forget it, Spock," Kirk said firmly. "When it's your turn to go, it's your turn to go." He saw a blank expression fall across Spock's face. Pure frustration made his feeble hands shake violently. "All right, all right," he almost shouted. "Take a good look at me. What do you see, Spock? All of the vast knowledge available to Starfleet Command has been exhausted. You heard it straight from the horse's mouth!"

Spock would not be discouraged. "Starfleet medical expertise, especially regarding human physiology, is without comparison, but Starfleet is essentially bureaucratic and extremely conservative. At this time, I suggest we must seek out new alternatives."

"We?" Kirk despaired. "Can't you see I'm finished, Spock?"

"Sir, right now I can think of at least two or three viable alternatives. All that I am asking is your permission to do some research."

Kirk almost laughed.

"Do you really think you can find the Fountain of Youth, or at the very least, someone who has invented it?"

"Captain, believe me, this death--your death--is unnecessary."

Spock had planted a seed of optimism in Kirk's mind. The pragmatic Spock would not be filling him full of false hope if there were no chance at all.

"All right, go on. If you think you can unmake what it has taken all these years to create by simply doing a little research, be my guest." Kirk knew it was much easier to give in than to argue with this man.

Inwardly, Spock sighed with relief. This was the green light he had been looking for. He relaxed noticeably as his mind began to formulate a plan.

Even Kirk seemed to relax. He felt like talking now.

"You know, Spock, I've thought about this day for a long time. I've watched myself grow older and I've watched you stay the same."

"That is not true, sir--"

"Let me finish! Of course, when I was younger, I'd put off thinking about it, even after that aging mess aboard the ENTERPRISE. What young man thinks of old age? But it's been on my mind recently. I never really ever forgot what happened, Spock. I just pushed it out of my mind. I always thought that was a preview of things to come. Captain James Kirk, senile but healthy. Funny, isn't it, how it turned out just the opposite."

"Sir--"

Kirk would not let him interrupt.

"Oh, I envy you, Spock. I've always admired you, but envy, this is new to me." Spock was astonished to hear Kirk admit to envy. "I want to live, Spock. I want to be young again. I want to travel great distances through uncharted space, I want to feel the pumping of my heart in the heat of battle, I want to feel the thrill of successful strategy..." He lowered his eyes and his voice. "I want to make love to a beautiful woman..."

"I've been in space practically all of my life, but the universe is so immense, so fantastic, I would need three or four lifetimes, not just one, to get it all out of my system. There is so much more to see, Spock." He paused for a moment. "You don't understand that, do you?"

He wanted to add, How can you when you sit here in front of me, strong and capable and completely out of touch with my physical reality! But he bit his tongue instead.

"Of course, I understand, Captain," Spock replied. "Satisfaction as related to one's work is very important. I enjoy my work in science. I enjoy the mental stimulation it brings me. But you are correct in that I did not always understand the compulsion that drives you humans to risk your lives for the sake of adventure. The Klingon and Romulan Empires exist only for simple reasons: to use power to gain power. The Organians exist for the pleasure of advanced mental stimulation. But humans are most peculiar in their desire to push beyond their physical and mental limits for the sheer sake of doing so. You have taught me that."

The Captain's old muscles tensed up.

"You strive to know more," he said pointedly.

Spock sat as calm as always. "To know more, yes. Not just to experience more."

Kirk's hands trembled faster than ever. "Knowledge comes with experience, Spock."

"Not necessarily, Captain."

A terrible headache began at Kirk's temple. Recent conversations with Spock often brought them on. Conversations that went nowhere. That perfectly ordered mind always working in perfect rhythms, logical progressions, never faltering, never stumbling...The old man tried to keep up with the Vulcan. His mind was still sharp and clear but his body...his body always seemed to drag him away from clarity and reason down toward bitter pain and frustration. How could he be expected to talk to Spock when he was always in pain?

Kirk wanted to cry out, because he couldn't hide his infirmities from Spock. Spock would see that he was imperfect, emotional and old. Oh, Great God of the Universe, don't let him see me like this! Beads of sweat broke out on Kirk's brow.

"Captain, is something wrong?" Spock's voice showed concern.

The Captain's fists were clenched tight. "Please, I think it's time for you to leave. I'm very tired."

"I understand perfectly, Captain," Spock said, although there was no way he could. He rose and looked down at the old man thoughtfully. "I am sorry if I upset you."

Kirk turned away from his view.

"No, no, it's all right. Go on." Friend or no friend, Kirk thought, God damn him, damn him...

Kirk felt a strong hand on his shoulders. "Jim," Spock said gently, conscious of the Captain's constant suffering.

"Just go on...please," he begged.

Silently, Spock turned and left the presence of the old man. He stood outside the room, sensing the Captain's despair. Then he went on.

Inside, Jim Kirk sat hunched over, face in hands, sobbing.

II.

The medical facilities at Starbase Two were extraordinary. The buildings gleamed in the sun as though made of polished ivory. No man approaching this opulent series of structures could help but feel that, certainly hope and, possibly, a cure lay inside.

Even as Spock stepped from a shuttlecraft landing to the medical center floor, he was impressed with a superb sense of order about him. It made him feel at ease and relaxed. As he came forward a young woman dressed in the hospital regulation uniform stepped out to greet him.

"Mr. Spock, I presume." His Vulcan demeanor distinguished him from the others. Spock nodded. "Welcome to Starbase Two. I am Miss Smith. Dr. McCoy has been notified of your arrival and is expecting you. Please follow me."

The girl, cool and efficient, turned and escorted Spock through a great set of double doors, through a spacious lobby teeming with activity and then into a large single corridor. They stepped gingerly on to an automatic sidewalk that conveyed them quickly through one building and into another.

"This is the permanent residence building, sir," the girl pointed out. "Dr. McCoy lives here."

She motioned for Spock to step off and they proceeded into a large courtyard full of dense plant life. Lush vegetation never failed to make at least a small impression on Spock, whose native Vulcan was rocky and barren, devoid of almost all flora except the fiercely hardy.

When the girl finally stopped, Spock was not surprised to find himself in front of a large door marked "Leonard McCoy".

"Here we are, sir." In open curiosity, she stared into his face studying his features, then smiled to herself as she flicked a button on a small intercom unit outside the door.

"Susan, is that you? Where's Spock?"

It was the undeniable voice of Dr. McCoy. A man noted for his dry wit, he sounded a bit more cantankerous with age, but his distinctive voice was still firm and in total control.

"Mr. Spock is right here with me, Doctor. Please open the door." The opening appeared instantly. "Go right in, Mr. Spock," she said pleasantly. "I know the Doctor is anxious to see you. He doesn't get many visitors."

As Spock entered the room, the first thing he saw was the familiar figure of "Bones" McCoy. The man was sitting in an airchair, and as Spock stepped inside, the doctor glided effortlessly toward him on the cushion of air which had long ago replaced old-fashioned rubber wheels.

"Spock, you old devil, am I glad to see you!" McCoy exclaimed warmly. He held an outstretched hand for Spock to take. Spock's handshake was firm but dispassionate. "Same old Spock. You never change, do you?"

"It is good to see you again, Dr. McCoy. You are looking well."

In fact, Dr. McCoy did look well for someone his age. Except for his white hair and his confinement to an airchair, he acted surprisingly alert and sound.

"You know, Spock, I thought I'd never see you again. You're not exactly the type who likes to keep in touch. Anyway, I figured without Jim Kirk and myself around to keep you out of trouble, you'd probably end up getting yourself killed in some intergalactic computer war somewhere." He chuckled. "Well, sit down and tell me what you've been doing with yourself." Spock found a comfortable seat. "Let's see, the last time I saw you was at Captain Kirk's promotion ceremony. How time flies. How long has it been, I wonder?"

Spock responded easily. "Exactly six years, five months, and twenty-seven days, Doctor."

McCoy sighed. "You definitely haven't changed a bit." He shook his head. "...except I heard you left Starfleet. That can't be true."

"It is true. I've been put in full charge of a scientific research center on one of the Rigel planets."

"That's amazing. Maybe you have changed, just a little. Tell me the truth, is the thrill of adventure in open space gone for you, Spock?"

The Vulcan looked kindly at the old gentleman.

"To be frank, Dr. McCoy, Captain Jacobs and I did not see eye to eye on many matters--including my word."

McCoy was astonished. "He didn't trust you? That's preposterous! Everybody knows you're the best First Officer in the fleet."

Mild bewilderment touched Spock. "Thank you, Doctor, for your vote of confidence; but to be more precise, the Captain felt continuing trepidation at my being left alone on the bridge and also about leaving me in command of the ENTERPRISE."

"You let him force you from your position! Does Jim Kirk know about this? He would be furious." The doctor was greatly vexed by this conversation. He had seldom before outwardly let the Vulcan know of his deep respect, but now upon hearing about this vicious attack on Spock's character, he must protest.

Spock continued. "Doctor, after long consideration, I finally concluded that if I were to appeal to a higher authority, such as James Kirk, morale on the ENTERPRISE during the ensuing trial would be thoroughly disrupted, and that would not change Captain Jacobs' prejudices about Vulcans in the slightest. I was offered a research grant on Rigel III and I decided to accept. I resigned my post and have been there for two years."

"Oh, Spock, I'm damn sorry to hear that. It's hard for me to believe that a man whose ancestors have been persecuted for three thousand years could harbor ridiculous racial prejudices like those. I hope I get to meet him some day so I can spit in his eye!"

Spock was resigned. "Spitting in Captain Jacobs' eye, Doctor McCoy, will have little if no effect on his particular intolerance."

McCoy was becoming more provoked by the minute. "How can a bigot be a starship captain, tell me that!"

"Captain Jacobs seems to bear no ill towards any other race or alien lifeform, so I suspect he holds adverse feelings only concerning Vulcans or only to me in particular and, in that case, uses my Vulcan heritage as a convenient excuse. I found him to be an excellent commander in all other respects."

"You're too kind to the bastard. I know some people in high places, Spock--just give me time and I'll have this whole thing straightened out. That man has got to go!"

"Dr. McCoy, whether the present captain of the ENTERPRISE remains in command is none of our concern, neither mine nor yours."

"Damn it, Spock," he insisted. "You of all people belong on the ENTERPRISE. Don't you miss it?"

Dr. McCoy had once again taken up the annoying habit of asking Spock the most pointed question imaginable in any given situation.

Of course, I miss it, Spock thought to himself, it was my life.

"Doctor, what you fail to realize is that the ENTERPRISE as you and I knew it is gone. There have been two captains since Captain Kirk, at least one First Officer after me and four ship's surgeons after you."

"It seems I'm a lot harder to replace," McCoy grumbled.

Ignoring McCoy's remark, Spock continued, "If I did go back, the only thing I would find there would be a job. Do you understand?"

McCoy sat resolutely in his chair, still fuming, but realizing too, that Spock was right. Poor Spock, he thought, even with his superior Vulcan physiology, there is nothing he can do to stop the progression of time and what it's doing to the rest of us.

"Well, I suppose you're right. Nothing lasts forever. Look at me. My eyesight is failing so fast I can hardly make you out." He caught himself quickly. "But don't get me wrong, Spock, I can still make out those pointy ears just fine."

McCoy laughed. He still had plenty of spunk despite his infirmities. Spock knew he hadn't practiced medicine for the last five years because of his failing eyesight and his confinement to an airchair some years before from a freak lab explosion.

Spock finally decided to get to the point of his visit with the good doctor. To put it off served no useful purpose.

"Dr. McCoy, I have come seeking your opinion and your help," he began.

McCoy was surprised if not astounded.

"My opinion? That's not like you, Spock. Let's face it, you and I played the game by much different rules."

Spock seemed quiet and withdrawn.

"That perhaps was true then, Doctor. However, I sincerely hope that today you will hear me out."

McCoy sensed Spock's seriousness.

"Of course, Mr. Spock. Whatever you say."

"Doctor, I have just come from Starbase Nine." He sighed as if the words were too terrible to speak. "Captain Kirk is dying..."

McCoy's body raised up, shuddered, then fell back, like a man collapsing in on himself. It had been several years since he had seen Kirk in person and even longer since he served under him, but their frequent telecommunications kept them in touch with each other. No other man's passing would cause the same degree of pain to Leonard McCoy as the passing of James Kirk.

"Poor devil. I never thought Jim would go before me. He's

a younger man. His heart, I suspect...the strain of all those years of service...It's just not fair."

Spock commented casually. "It has nothing to do with fairness, Doctor."

McCoy exploded at the stoic Vulcan. "Damn you, Spock! You and the printed circuitry you have for feelings. Nothing will ever happen to your heart, will it? You haven't got one!"

Spock looked ashen, sick. His normal color was gone, replaced by a horrible pallor. McCoy was disgusted with himself for being so unkind. Spock would not be there if it were not for his real feelings for Jim Kirk.

"Why did I say that?" McCoy muttered in apology. "I guess out of habit. I'm sorry, Spock."

Spock raised his head and looked full into McCoy's face.

"Doctor, we must cease our mutual cruelties at once. We must devote our full energies to saving the Captain."

McCoy was shocked at Spock's choice of words. "Spock, we're not on the ENTERPRISE anymore, and Jim is not in the grips of an alien starship. We can't save him this time. He is old--like me. He must die and you must accept that."

"Doctor, I propose to you that there is something we can do, in fact, that there are several things we can do. No doubt you have heard of the general replacement of aged parts with mechanical ones as practiced by most advanced civilizations since the 20th century, or the rejuvenation center at the Alpha-Tau complex or the body replacement center on Vitalis IV..."

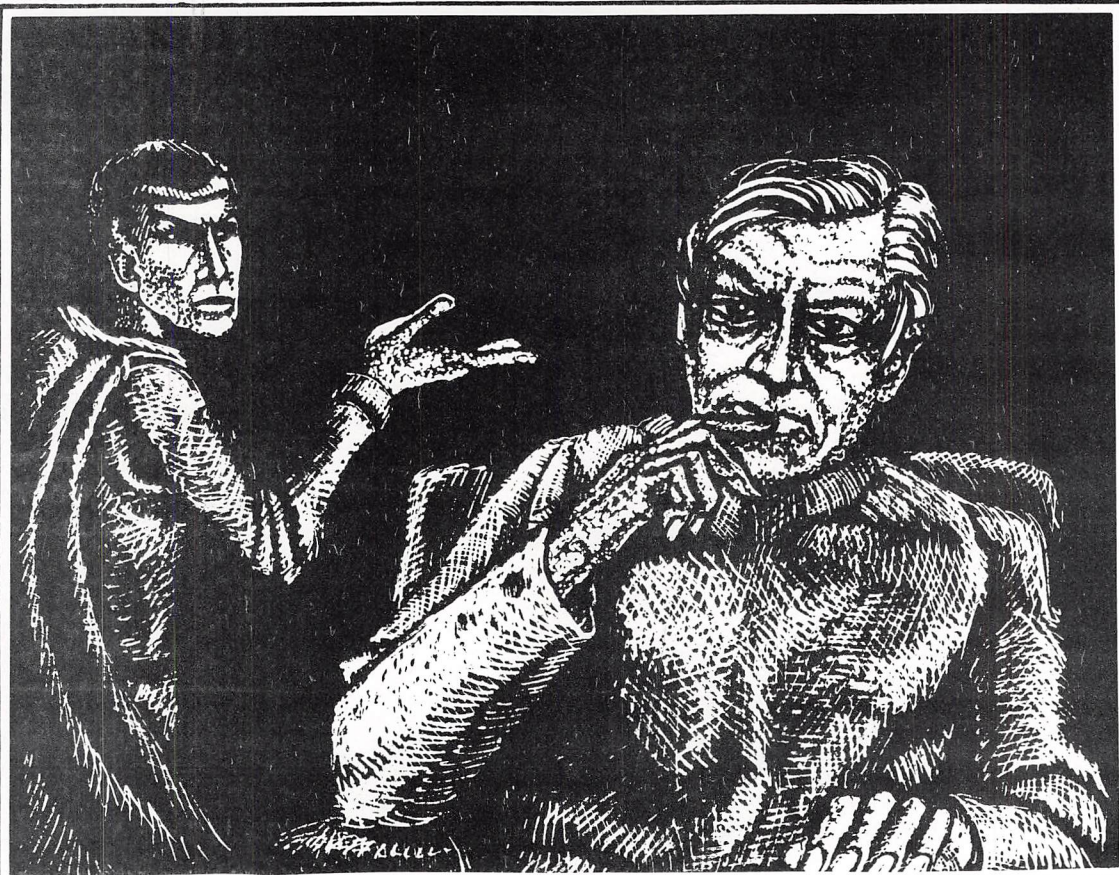
"Seems like I've heard that somewhere before. Also something about immortality."

"Doctor, immortality is not the desired goal here. A longer lifespan for the Captain is."

McCoy shook his head, beginning to sense what the Vulcan was getting at.

"Spock, the Vitalis IV project is immoral and outrageous. The Alpha-Tau center is experimental and dangerous, and what good would it do to give Jim a mechanical heart or liver or whatever when the rest of him has deteriorated beyond return?"

"You are right, Doctor." McCoy's argument only spurred Spock on. "The only answer is complete replacement of his failing body. The Vitalis IV project works. They can place his brain inside an exact duplicate android of himself at, say, thirty-five or forty years of age. Through rehabilitation, the brain with its unique personality takes over the body,



completely and thoroughly."

"All right, Spock," the doctor capitulated. "Yes, there are methods available throughout the galaxy. There always have been, I suppose. But they are artificial, vulgar, inhuman. If the Captain goes for it, great; but he won't. Give up, Spock."

Spock leaned forward in his chair.

"Ours is an age of miracles, Doctor. I find it logical to make use of these miracles when it is advantageous to do so."

McCoy was almost nauseated. "What you mean is that you want to make a machine out of Jim! After all these years with humans, you still prefer the company of nuts and bolts, don't you?"

Spock did not hear this last of McCoy's barbs. He was silent, lost in the deep workings of his own mind, convinced and convincing himself that he had arrived at the solution to his dilemma.

McCoy assumed correctly that Spock did not hear his last outburst. Anyway, the doctor's argument was no match for Spock's perfect logic. Not so perfect, Spock, McCoy considered to himself, not nearly as perfect as you'd like to think.

"Why do you want to keep him alive when it's his time to die?" the old gentleman asked quietly.

McCoy's voice settled softly on Spock's ears like a leaf sailing to earth on the breeze. There was no malice in the question, only the physician's need to understand the alien. And the doctor's question was poignant, pointed. It picked at the very heart of Spock's thinking.

"Doctor, James Kirk is a great man. He has been a starship captain and a ranking Federation admiral. It is logical for me to want him to continue."

If the occasion weren't so tragic, McCoy would laugh in Spock's face. He only shook his head.

"You use your logic to suit your own purposes, Spock. There is no logic in that."

Spock was startled by McCoy's reply. The Vulcan swallowed hard, his mind racing and tumbling through a jumble of forbidden emotion. He felt himself blurting out the response, but what he heard was controlled, not at all what he expected, and yet all that could be expected.

"Dr. McCoy," he began, "of course, Jim Kirk is my friend. I cannot deny that. But he is also one of the greatest living men of our time. An interplanetary hero. He has come through the ranks of Starfleet, not only as the youngest academy graduate to command a starship, but also the one to hold his command the longest. He has been decorated by almost every planet in the Federation including the Palm Leaf of Axanar Peace Mission, the Prentaries Ribbon of Commendation, and the Grankite Order of Tactic. His awards for valor include the Federation Medal of Honor, the Silver Palm with Cluster--"

McCoy interrupted him. "I know, Spock. I know."

Spock went on. "Admiral Kirk has done more to maintain constant peace in the galaxy over the last forty years than any other single man. I propose that the Admiral's knowledge of alien cultures and of military strategy is of immense, if not crucial, value to the Federation. Is that enough of a reason to satisfy you, Doctor, or should I continue?"

By now, McCoy slouched in his chair. "Please, spare me, Spock. Your verbal overkill has left me weak."

Spock raised one eyebrow. "I was simply answering your attack on my logic."

McCoy sat back in his chair, knowing he had done all he could to try to stop what Spock had in mind. He had failed to permeate even the shell of Spock's logic. Like a stranger

he was meeting for the first time, McCoy studied Spock intently. With pale eyes, he looked and looked, trying with all his might to see clearly and to really understand what it was he saw. Even through the dim eyes of old age he began to grasp a hint of what motivated the man before him.

...there is something inside you, Spock, it occurred to McCoy--his mind sharpening to a bright point--that drives you toward logic. Something unconscious, isn't it? Something more than just Vulcan philosophy. A need for the kind of universe that makes sense. Don't you know that the real universe is always one step beyond logic?...

"I feel sorry for you, Spock," the doctor said kindly.

Spock looked up at the soft blue eyes. "Dr. McCoy, I hardly think that response is warranted at this time."

McCoy rubbed his tired eyes before speaking. "It's not for now but for later. If you do manage to pull this thing off, you'll see it backfire in your face."

Spock took no heed of McCoy's words, but stood and prepared to leave. "Thank you, Doctor, you've been of immense help to me."

"How's that?" McCoy grumbled. "All I've tried to do is talk you out of it."

"As a sounding board. It takes effort even for Vulcans to consider alternatives and come to conclusions. Often discussion is the only avenue to decision. Goodbye, Dr. McCoy. I hope to see you again."

"Good luck, Spock," the doctor called after him. "You'll need it."

In the back of his mind, McCoy knew that Vulcans did not believe in luck.

III.

There were a multitude of planets in the Federation system, each more precious and different than the next, each more beautiful and exotic than the last. Mr. Spock's arrival on Orion 7 earlier in his life would have been eventful. As First Officer of the ENTERPRISE, he and Captain Kirk would have been greeted by a half-dozen officials of the city, taken to luxurious quarters and treated to the city's most lavish entertainments. At this time in his life, however, the splendor of the city's rainbow skies and three coral moons went unnoticed and unappreciated.

The shuttlecraft taxi that took him from his starliner to the city's central plaza made the one that transported him to Starbase Two look like a cattle car. It was furnished like someone's private vehicle, with opulent fixtures and hand-tooled leather seats. The Federation, with all of its billions of money credits, was still a gigantic governmental agency and could never allocate funds for this type of sensual luxury. Orion 7, owned privately by a Terran shipping magnate, was used almost exclusively by the Federation diplomatic corps. At least thirty ambassadorial dinners were held there every week. It was an honor to be presented to a resident ambassador on Orion 7, and it was an even greater honor for a roving ambassador to be assigned there.

Spock was neither assigned nor invited to come to this marvelous city. He had come on his own to visit Christine Chapel, not on a social call, but to ask a favor of her.

What would she be like? Much older, he suspected. He had not seen her for years, but he remembered her as Dr. McCoy's head nurse on the ENTERPRISE, and recalled her as efficient and dedicated. He also remembered that Christine Chapel was in love with him. She always did her best to hide her feelings in public, but everyone knew. Because it was an impossible love, she even tried to hide it from him, but he, more acutely than anyone else, knew it, too.

How Christine Chapel, former Chief Medical Nurse aboard the U.S.S. ENTERPRISE, came to find herself on Orion 7 never failed to astound even her. She seemed to take quickly to the role of hostess to the galaxy's most important people, even though she would sometimes miss the real help she felt she gave in her nursing duties.

She thought of the ENTERPRISE not infrequently, though it had been several years since she resigned her commission. It was a wonderful part of her life, a part filled constantly with

the mysteries of the universe. Her work with Dr. McCoy in the medical laboratory was never without challenge, and she loved the traveling and meeting of intelligent alien beings. Sometimes, when her duties on Orion 7 got particularly pressing, she wondered how she could ever have given up that life.

She left the ENTERPRISE in flight from a one-sided love affair she could no longer endure. Soon another man, an important man, entered her life. They married after knowing each other only two months.

Now, fifteen years later, Christine happily called Orion 7 her home.

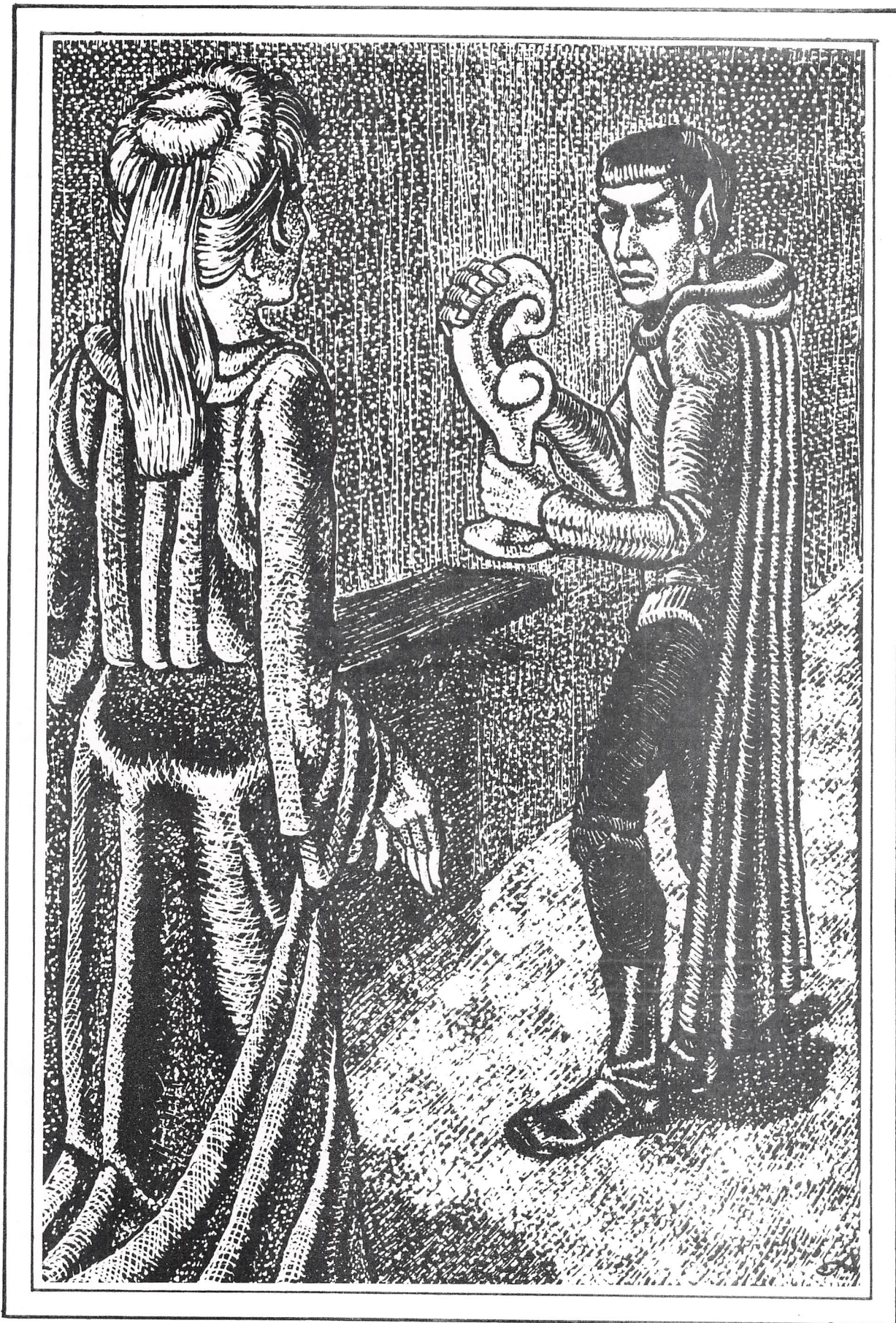
The servant entered the large master bedroom and bowed respectfully. He handed the seated woman a sealed envelope.

"A message for you, Madam. It just arrived." He bowed again and left.

The envelope was the cream-white of stationery used by Starfleet Command. It was like seeing an old friend just to feel the fine texture of the envelope in her hands. She turned the envelope over and saw a royal blue seal on the back. It was the Vulcan IDIC emblem. Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination. Sometimes, she saw the letters on Vulcan correspondence to the Orion embassy, but she had never before received a personal message incorporating this same seal. Her heart raced.

She tore the envelope open hurriedly and greedily consumed every word. The message was handwritten in beautiful script and signed simply--Your servant, Spock.

Though she would deny such a thought, Christine often thought back on Mr. Spock and wondered exactly where in the galaxy his travels were taking him. Her intense love for Spock had all but died with time, but today, her husband was forgotten as though he never existed. It was true that she never felt the passion for Ambassador Thompson that she held openly for Spock and that when they were first married she was racked with guilt that she felt so little ardor for him in their marriage bed. For so long, Christine wondered whether Spock would be the only man she would ever yearn for, the only man whose presence would leave her shaking and weak. But time and distance have a way of reversing situations, conforming yearnings to fit present circumstances. For the past fifteen years, her complete love for her husband had all but replaced any feelings for Spock. But, if this were true, why did the very thought of him now, after all this time, produce those same feelings in her?



"Madam," a voice interrupted, "Mr. Spock has arrived. He is waiting in the west reception room." The servant turned and left her alone.

Christine Chapel Thompson, a state ambassador's wife, turned and followed him. For this meeting she had worn her most beautiful gown. She did not check herself in the mirror for she wanted to be perfect for him, young and radiant, and the mirror would too quickly detect her flaws. She had not thought of herself as an old woman until today.

As she entered the room, his back was towards her. He was inspecting a rare Organian art treasure, a find of great value, an obvious gift to the Ambassador.

She was startled at the sight of him. The elegance of his stance culminating in the slope of his shoulders and curve of his back and the back of his head capped in the familiar sheen of cropped black jet left her breathless. Her eyes greedily followed the line of his torso, as it flowed from his shoulders to his waist and down the long legs to his boots. She had forgotten Spock's physical beauty and its effect on her senses.

When he turned, it was elegant and poetic. His fine hands still held the art piece but he put it aside immediately and went to her. There was no smile on his face, for Spock never smiled, but his dark eyes were soft and clear and receptive to her presence.

She was surprised to see him stand before her, not in a Starfleet regulation uniform, but in a simple dove-grey tunic over tapering black pants. Otherwise, he was basically the same, changed little since their last encounter several years before. He had neither the heaviness nor the loss of grace that often came with middle age. Rather, he looked more mature and, if possible, more distinguished.

When he met her, he bowed from the waist.

"Madam Ambassador, greetings from your friend and servant, Spock."

She felt a rush of fever spread throughout her body. "Mr. Spock, please," she implored. "Protocol is neither expected nor cherished in this house. Please leave that for the Embassy. There is no need to bow to me. You and I remain friends always through time and space." She bade him to be seated. For a moment she only sat and smiled at him.

"Why are you out of uniform, Mr. Spock? Are there problems at Starfleet?" Her question was a logical one.

"I am afraid my note was not quite honest in all appearances,

Christine. I am no longer stationed on the ENTERPRISE, nor am I connected with Starfleet."

She was unprepared for this revelation. "But the message was written on Starfleet letterhead. I recognized it."

"I took the liberty of writing on Starfleet stationery as a precaution," Spock admitted. "I had no real information regarding your accessibility. I assumed that you would have a secretary to handle your correspondence and I hoped that you would personally open my letter. By using the Starfleet interstellar mail system--"

"Somewhat illegally, Mr. Spock." She wanted to smile but managed to hold a stern expression.

"Yes, I realize that. But I had to assure as best I could that you yourself would read my message."

Christine stood gracefully and walked quickly away under the pretense of checking the condition of a rather large flower arrangement.

"I hope that you departed Starfleet under pleasant circumstances, Mr. Spock." Somehow she could not imagine him working anywhere else but along side his library-computer station on the bridge of the ENTERPRISE. She touched a flower and smelled it.

"I resigned my post two years ago," he related.

"You're not married, are you?" she blurted out before she could stop herself.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "My father was nearly seventy before he married my mother. I feel little need for a wife at this time as I am currently directing a research project on Rigel III."

"Oh, a mysterious science project?" she queried, trying to regain her composure.

"Not mysterious at all," he said pleasantly. "It deals simply with the thermo-dynamic relationships of Keltonian physics to time-space deviation."

She was so nervous she almost laughed. He would never understand her reaction to his statement, so she somehow stifled the laughter among the flowers.

A servant entered carrying a tray.

"Brandy, Mr. Spock?" Christine asked. "It's quite good."

The manservant served the amber liqueur from a crystal decanter. Spock studied his glass intently before consuming the entire contents.

Christine approached him. "Mr. Spock, I've never seen you drink like that before. Are you nervous?"

Spock was also surprised with himself. "Nervous? Of course not, Christine." He cleared his throat sheepishly. "Simply thirsty."

Seeing the Vulcan's apparent apprehension made her more relaxed. She reached out to him and for a moment took his hand. She saw his face change suddenly from passionless cool to terrible concern. She wanted to put his hand to her lips but restrained herself. He was grateful for her sensitivity and control.

"Mr. Spock, is there something wrong? Your message said only that you wished to see me, but I sense that you are concerned about something." She looked straight into his dark eyes.

"Christine," he began, "I have just come from Starbase Nine, from a visit with the Captain."

"Captain Kirk?" she asked with surprise. Her heart sank as she tried to take in what he was saying. Something was wrong between Spock and his Captain and if so, she knew he was heart-broken.

"Christine, Jim is dying. The doctors give him little time."

She responded quickly, just as he had hoped.

"What can I do to help Captain Kirk? There is nothing in my power I wouldn't do for him." From the depths of her heart she meant it.

He started his story.

"The planet Vitalis IV is located in the far southwest quadrant of sector Five. The Vitalians offer a unique technique of life preservation. If I can get the Captain there in time, this technique can save his life." He stopped to regroup his words so that they would be precise in meaning. "Vitalis IV is located in a part of the galaxy that is not easily accessible. A starship visits but once every four years. There are no wars in the area, so cruisers are not assigned there. The few merchant ships that do venture out that far are painfully slow. I have exhausted the possibility of conventional travel. I must get Captain Kirk to Vitalis IV quickly, or it will be too late. Christine, we have so little time."

His eyes were desperate as he talked to her, and his voice reached out with that same desperation. She knew he would do anything in order to make these arrangements for his Captain, even to the point of throwing aside all pride and integrity, if she would ask that of him. The Vulcan Spock was a man of his word. All she had to do was make him give it.

She had never loved him more than at this moment. She would do anything for him, now and for always.

"Mr. Spock, I am gratified that you have come to me with your problem and I am grateful that I have the means to help you. My husband, the Ambassador, will be returning tomorrow. There is no doubt in my mind that he can arrange to charter a vehicle for you and Captain Kirk. Whatever legalities are involved can be dispensed with, I'm sure." He was visably relieved.

She continued, "I will see that the Ambassador gives you top priority and that he grants your request as speedily as possible."

There, she had said it. She had given him what he wanted, what he came for. She would be the instrument that saved his Captain. If she could never give him her love, she could give him this gift which was true to her heart and perfect to his mind.

She studied him thoughtfully, longingly. Then she snapped herself from the reverie.

"Well, Mr. Spock, if there is nothing more I can do for you, you won't hurt my feelings a bit by going on your way. I know you have many arrangements to make." She stood.

He took her cue. "I realize you must have a very busy schedule, Christine, and you have been more than generous with your time."

"I've enjoyed seeing you again, Mr. Spock. You don't know how much. Please remember, my home is your home whenever you wish to visit Orion 7 again." She took his hand and held it a little longer than necessary. "Goodbye."

It hurt her to end the visit so abruptly, but her sensitivity to his feelings of discomfort pushed her. She could almost imagine his relief.

"Goodbye, Christine," he said simply. "Peace. Live long and Prosper." There was a slight hesitation in his manner, as though he wanted to say something more, but he nodded to her instead and quickly went out.

As he left, Christine watched him sadly. There was so much she wanted to say to him, private sentiments and personal

confessions. Somehow she sensed she would never see him again.

Their relationship had always been truly one-sided. It could never be anything else. She left Starfleet when despair and rejection drove her to that conclusion. Yet today, it was as if she had to force herself to come to that same conclusion again.

A servant's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Excuse me, Madam, but the Andorian Ambassador and his wife are waiting at the Embassy."

"What do they want?" she responded absent-mindedly.

"The usual tour, Madam."

"I'll be there shortly." She looked back in Spock's direction. Of course, there was no one there...

As she began her walk down the great hall toward her impatient guests, her thoughts were on Spock. He would never have come to her at all, if it weren't for her position and her influence. Instead of infuriating her, she was grateful for the opportunity to see him and to help him.

A huge gilded mirror hung just outside her entrance to the Embassy. Christine Chapel Thompson stopped before it and took a good long look in the mirror. The image of a handsome blond woman in a long formal gown pleased her. She gently touched her hair and went in.

Thoughts of her husband floated into her mind. For the first time today she wanted to be near him. The Ambassador was her devoted husband and she was his beloved wife. She would just have to learn to accept the idea that the man Spock, a phantom from her distant past, affected her like no other. And, maybe, that wasn't such an unpleasant thought after all....

IV.

Arrangements made by Ambassador Thompson were more than sufficient. Within two days of his meeting with Christine, Spock was aboard the MERRYWEATHER, a privately owned ship of medium proportions. The MERRYWEATHER was usually chartered by businessmen from the Antibes solar region for two-week periods of rest and relaxation and this trip was no exception.

Spock's quarters were cramped but adequate. There was a small bed with overhead lamp, a corner desk and a set of built-in drawers. The toilet facilities were large enough to accomodate only the thinnest of persons. Spock wondered if there were no fat businessmen from the Antibes region.

If the living quarters were small and dark, the upper deck was large and spacious. It was wide-open with almost no partitions at all. Instead, there were several areas of activity. Sports of all kinds were in one, more quiet games like chess and galactic cards in another. There was a refreshment area and a conversation area and even a nap area.

Though the MERRYWEATHER had a three-dimensional chessboard, the Vulcan's favorite diversion, Spock had no interest in striking up a game. He spent almost the entire seven day journey in his cabin.

Periodically, he would be disturbed by a steward who asked him if he needed anything, but Spock required nothing but an occasional meal. Raw fruits and vegetables were brought in the morning and if he requested it, a cooked vegetable would be served for supper. There were no visitors other than the steward, but sometimes an extemporaneous disturbance by a group of extra loud party-goers plagued the Vulcan to distraction.

Spock had brought documents with him, copies from Orion 7 of all papers relating to the Vitalis IV project. While he was on the diplomatic planet, he used their computer banks to provide him with all necessary and available data regarding a certain Dr. T. M. Ambrose and his mysterious little planet. During his confinement on the MERRYWEATHER, Spock used the time to study the authenticity of those documents and the qualifications of Dr. Ambrose. He also discovered a thesis by Ambrose on the techniques used in his experimentation.

Dr. T. M. Ambrose had borrowed certain knowledge of android-making from what was now a depopulated world. The Federation had given it a name, or rather, a number; Spock knew it simply as "Mudd's Planet".

While Ambrose worked as a top android technician, there had been a disaster, a "plague" for lack of a better word, that

wiped out the total android populace. Within two years, the entire planet had been abandoned. Ambrose left "Mudd's Planet" for Vitalia IV at the other end of the galaxy and had developed his own theory and technology for a less permanent but infinitely more refined android body.

Sitting at the small desk, Spock studied the technical diagrams thoroughly and read and re-read the Ambrose papers. "Fascinating," he commented out loud. Logical, he often thought to himself.

With all of his extensive scientific training, he could find no hole, no lapses of logic in either theory or technique. When the ship finally reached Vitalis IV, there were no doubts in the Vulcan's mind that this type of operation performed on Captain Kirk could and would be a success.

When arriving on the planet's surface from the larger craft, Spock **was** picked up and delivered in a smaller shuttlecraft. This one was the planet's only "bus" from the sky to the ground. It occasionally broke down in mid-flight, But Spock was lucky in that it made the trip without mishap.

As he stepped out of the small craft, he was surprised at the large welcoming committee waiting below. There were six individuals--four men, two women--all dressed in clinical garb and all holding small rectangular boxes, the equivalent of clipboards, close to their bodies.

"Hello there," one of them called out cheerfully. "Welcome to Vitalis IV, gentlemen!" There was a moment of uncertainty when the shuttlecraft door closed leaving only Spock standing before them.

"Aren't there any others?" the youthful leader asked carefully.

"No others," Spock answered. "Were you expecting more?"

"But...but the ship," he sputtered and pointed upward.

"I am the only one to be dropped off here. You were notified of my coming. I am Spock."

A wave of recognition flooded the leader's face.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Spock. Well, we're certainly glad you made it. I am Martin Carson, assistant to Dr. Ambrose. There are several of the doctor's technicians," he nodded graciously toward his associates who nodded in turn to Mr. Spock. "Uncle Theo--I mean Dr. Ambrose is waiting to meet you. Come this way." He motioned for Spock to walk beside him. The two of

moved within the midst of the group who chatted and smiled innocuously, as if Spock were not there at all.

"I know you've made a long journey, Mr. Spock. Would you care to rest awhile?"

"That won't be necessary," Spock responded quickly. "I want to see Dr. Ambrose as soon as possible."

"Of course," the young man said, leading the group into a building. As they turned a corner, the rest of the company dropped away, leaving the young spokesman and Spock on their own.

As they walked, Spock was impressed by the building itself. It was much like the medical facilities on Starbase Two, with its gleaming walls and polished marble floors, though not nearly as large. There seemed to be several rows of laboratories on both sides of the corridor. They passed a conference room where three female clinicians were pouring over what looked like a set of blueprints projected onto screens. To Spock, the number of project personnel looked adequate and the facilities were more than impressive.

Suddenly, the young man stopped in front of a door. "This is Dr. Ambrose's office. Please go in and make yourself comfortable. He will be right with you." The man left Spock alone within the confines of the office.

The room itself was large. The walls were wood-covered and the desk was a combination of chrome-alloy, wood and glass. As with all doctors, there were the usual number of commendations, degrees and awards. These were recessed into one wall, with soft light accents strategically placed. The decor of the room was very contemporary and very expensive.

Located to the right of the desk was a machine that Spock recognized as a computer. It was small and compact, with few controls, but its long tail snaked out from under the desk and ran down into the floor. Spock assumed it was tied into a much larger computer somewhere in the complex.

As Spock was turned in his seat, peering around the room, the back door flew open and a short robust man came briskly into the room. He walked directly to the desk and sat down in front of Spock. He was an older man with waves of grey hair that radiated from his face. His thick mustache was also grey, and he caressed it with his lower lip when he was not talking. He took a moment to glance at a stack of tapes he had brought with him before he spoke.

"All right now," he began firmly. "I am Dr. Theodore Martin Ambrose." He glanced up. "You are Mr. Spock? You wish to make arrangements for an Ambrobody?"

"Yes, that is correct," Spock answered to both questions.

The doctor eyed the Vulcan suspiciously. "For yourself? You look plenty healthy to me, but it's never too early to plan for the future."

"No, not for myself. For another."

"I see. Go on."

"He is old, dying. He wishes not to die."

"Of course. Tell me more about him. Is he a Vulcan like you?"

"He is human."

As fast as Spock answered these questions, the doctor programmed them into his machine.

"To what age does he wish to return?"

Spock took a small cylindrical card from inside his shirt.

"I have all the pertinent information on this tape. I presume your machine can use it."

The doctor's stern expression disappeared and he became almost joyful. "Oh, wonderful. It's so good to see someone here who has come prepared. You Vulcans think of everything." He took the tape and placed it into a shiny slot.

Immediately a printout emerged from the machine and its contents were instantaneously flashed onto a small viewing screen much like Captain Kirk's telecommunicator.

"Oh, my, my," the doctor repeated, much impressed. "Admiral James T. Kirk, retired. An officer of the United Federation of Planets. It's no wonder a man like that has sought out my process." The doctor looked Spock over a little more closely. "You must be important to the Federation yourself, Mr. Spock."

"No, Doctor. I am no longer affiliated with Starfleet."

"But," the doctor protested, "is that not a Federation science pin you are wearing?"

"I am part of a Federation-funded research program. You are quite observant, Dr. Ambrose." Spock disliked being inspected by this little man.

Ambrose smiled broadly thinking it was Spock's intention to compliment him.

"Let me tell you of our program here," he went on. "I am the inventor of this, if I do say so myself, revolutionary project. We use only the finest materials here. Expense is no factor when it comes to detailing--"

Spock cut off his prattle. "Dr. Ambrose, I am quite knowledgeable as to where you come from and where you got this 'revolutionary' procedure."

Ambrose cleared his throat. "You are? I see."

"And, I am also well aware of the quality and relative cost of the materials you use. I did not come to Vitalis IV to discuss these matters with you."

The doctor was surprised by the Vulcan's tone.

"Mr. Spock, say no more. Obviously you are a man of gifted mental abilities, so let me be the first to tell you that we have no secrets here on Vitalis IV. As the inventor and sole patent holder of the Ambrobody with its life-time guarantee, I am at your disposal to answer any and all questions you care to put to me."

"Then tell me, Doctor, how human will he be?"

The doctor spoke deliberately.

"Mr. Spock, as you know, the idea behind the Ambrobody is not new, but I seem to be the first and only person in this part of the galaxy to make it work.

"To the layman," he continued, "it sounds simple enough. Make an android, a replica if you will, of the subject's own natural body and then place that subject's brain inside the new body, being careful, of course, not to damage the brain in the process. The brain retains the personality of the subject, his memory and knowledge. It then controls the new body as if it were the original."

He stopped for emphasis.

"You ask me how human he will be? If he were only Vulcan like you, Spock, he would be almost good as new." The little doctor sighed. "Humans, of course, are much more complex."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Really, Doctor?"

"Emotionally speaking," the doctor hastily added. "Humans are so headstrong, so unpredictable. For example, there is a great link between emotions and physical responses in humans. Sexually, humans are very active, almost promiscuous. Of course, all sexual activity would be gone..."

"Except in the mind," Spock said.

"Of course. The mind has control here. It is the key. Naturally he would be able to handle any other type of physical dexterity quite well, in fact as well as ever." He hoped to make points with the Vulcan with that last remark. However, Spock did not seem to outwardly respond.

"I have read there is no hunger or thirst," Spock said reflectively.

The doctor smiled. "There is no need for primitive energy sources, such as food or drink. The Ambrobody runs on perpetual electro-cellular energy. Of course, if your Admiral Kirk wanted to partake of a meal with friends, there is an internal pouch located right here," he pointed to a spot on his left side, "to catch the food so that it can be disposed of later."

He saw Spock frown.

"My dear Mr. Spock, I sense your concern for the welfare of the Admiral. Let me remind you that humans have active imaginations. More than one of my human clients has confided to me that he actually thinks he smells the aroma and tastes the bouquet of his favorite wine."

Spock pursed his lips. "But that is impossible."

The doctor had to concede. "Technically, yes." But he quickly rose to the challenge. "First, let's concentrate on what he will be able to do. From what I know of the case, he now is old and infirm, am I correct?" He did not wait for Spock's answer. "You bring him to Vitalis IV a decrepit, burned-out shell and when I, and of course the marvelous staff we have here, give him back to you, he will be the man you remember him to be, the man he wishes to be. He will be able to read, walk, run, see, hear, laugh, joke, travel. He will be able to think clearly, unhampered by the frustrations of an aching body. There will be no forgetfulness, no senility, absolutely no more pain..."

"No pain?"

"Think of it, Spock! A life with no more pain, because of a completely efficient body. Surely the thought of that would appeal to someone like you."

"Indeed it does, Doctor."

Spock's gaze shifted for a moment as he recalled his meeting with Kirk and his distress at finding the Captain in ill health and in such great pain. How wonderful it would be to see Jim young and vital again...Dr. Ambrose's promise of a new Jim Kirk was more than the Vulcan had ever hoped for.

After a minute, the doctor shifted positions and a medallion he wore around his neck caught Spock's eye. The glint of gold pulled him sharply from his mental wanderings

back to the naked reality of the Captain's present situation. A tiny spot of doubt nagged at the Vulcan's rationale.

"The Ambrobody does not...It can't feel, Doctor."

"Feel!" Ambrose blurted. "My good man, it doesn't need to feel, it will DO! And do it better than the Admiral's natural body ever could." He quickly lowered his voice. "Spock, if your Admiral Kirk truly wishes to live, he will adapt."

Spock sat quietly, thinking silently to himself. He considered every thing the Doctor had said and weighed it cautiously against the failing old man's battle with pain. Dr. Ambrose offered Jim Life. It was as simple as that.

"Dr. Ambrose," Spock said, "I am curious regarding the rehabilitation period. How long does that usually take?"

"Oh, that all depends on the individual subject. I never estimate on that until I have had a chance to examine the patient myself." He got up and walked to the door. "Let me show you more of our facilities." As he motioned toward the entranceway, it opened quickly and the doctor and Spock stepped through it.

Once again, Spock was walking in a gleaming corridor, following a man in white.

"This is our construction laboratory, Spock. Here, the Ambrobodies are molded and formed. A lot of handwork goes into this step, but I always insist on the best for my clients."

Spock peered through a glass door into a large room filled with technicians. They were laboring in groups of three and four over several different tables. Spock couldn't see exactly what was on each table but, now and then, he did catch a glimpse of a human form, a head or a leg among other alien bodies.

"Now come with me," the doctor requested.

They went on to the next large laboratory. At this one, the doctor opened the door and escorted Spock inside. Dr. Ambrose was a fine salesman and he knew how to play all the angles. "Not all my clients are allowed in here, you know."

The room was large but completely closed in. There the crucial surgery was performed by meticulous doctors and infallible machines. There were all types of monitoring equipment, large and small consoles of pentagonal shapes. Overshadowing these were four huge cylindrical columns reaching ten feet high which, though still now, pulsated with rhythmic bursts of energy during surgery. The columns were called life-sustaining tanks and their contents and function created the atmosphere necessary for the subject to endure the extensive surgery. The Ambrobody

concept was impressive and so, too, were the machines that accomplished the fact.

"And this is Surgery, Mr. Spock," the doctor reported triumphantly.

"I am well aware of that, Doctor," Spock said as he wandered throughout the room. His eyes seemed to gobble up and analyze what he saw like a ravenous animal.

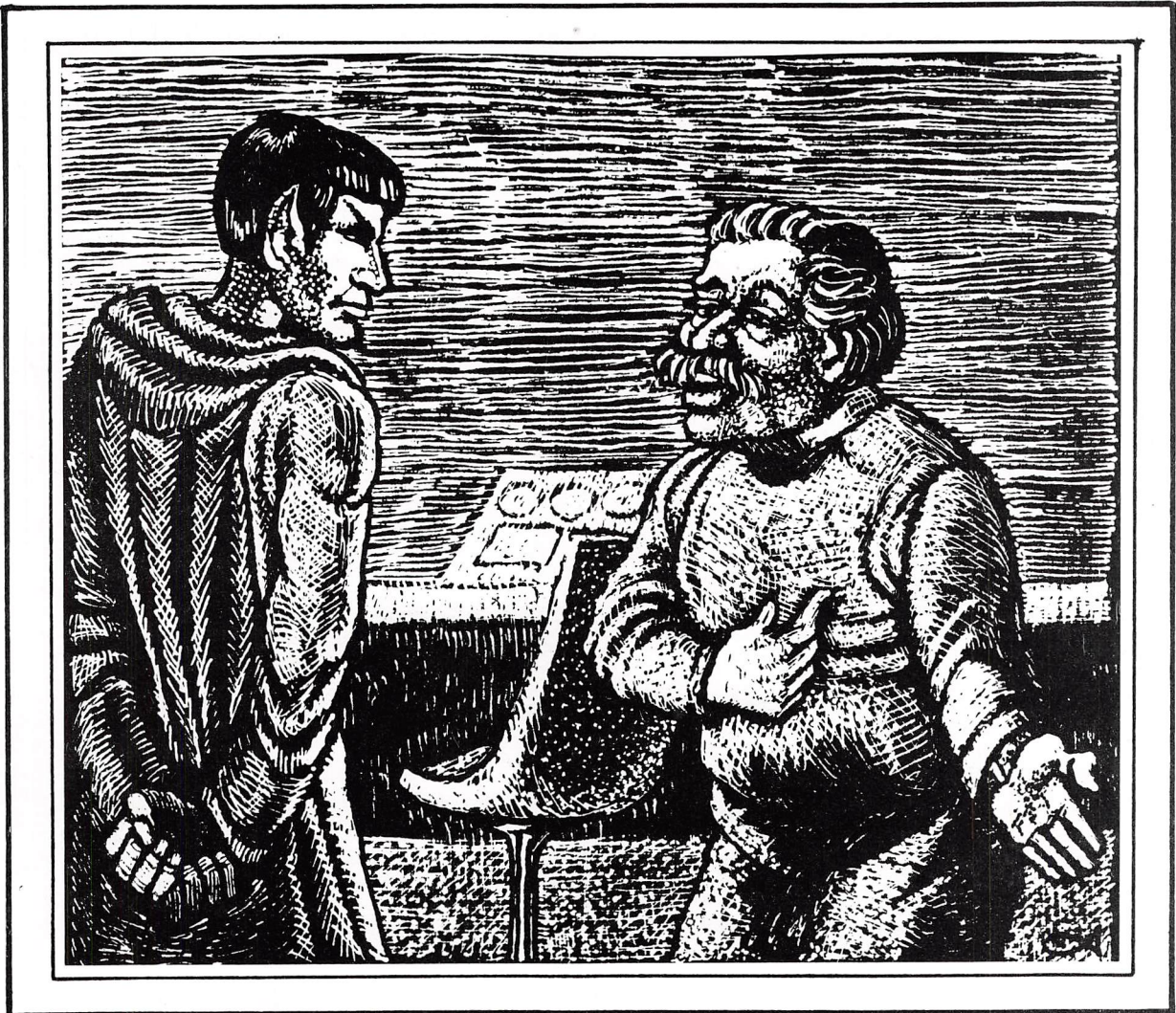
"Impressive, isn't it?" Dr. Ambrose smiled.

"Quite."

"Being a scientist yourself, you can appreciate the extreme frontiers of sophistication this one room represents."

Spock turned and asked abruptly, "How many lives have been lost in this room?"

"Failures?" The doctor had to think quickly. "Only one-half dozen in seven years. And those people were simply brought to Vitalis IV too late for anything to help. Their brains were



too far gone to maintain the Ambrobodies. They were practically rotting apart in our hands."

Spock turned and faced Ambrose directly. "You are the sole inventor of this process?"

The doctor puffed up like a peacock.

"Yes, that is true. You don't think one man can be responsible for all of this, do you?"

"Not exactly, Doctor. I do not believe that you could be responsible for all of this." His statement was made clearly, without emotion.

The doctor was flabbergasted.

"Now look here, Spock! If you can't trust me to handle your precious Admiral Kirk's case, then take him somewhere else. See where that gets you!"

Spock frowned slightly. Impetuous outbursts like the one the human doctor displayed were always unsettling to him.

"Dr. Ambrose, please. I am not at all opposed to your process; in fact, I am totally in favor of it. I am simply requesting to deal with an authority who is not as emotional as yourself."

"There is no one else in authority here, Spock! It's me ...or nothing." The little doctor gave a small stamp of his foot for emphasis.

"Then it shall have to be you," Spock answered, moving closer to the grey-haired man. When he was nearly on top of him the Vulcan spoke again. His tone radiated power and menace.

"But I am sure you are aware of the implications that a mistake regarding such a well-known and respected person as Admiral Kirk could cost your reputation."

The doctor swallowed hard. "That sounds like a threat."

Spock's eyes narrowed to fine slits. "Vulcans do not make threats, Doctor. We usually find we don't have to."

For a moment, there was complete silence.

"When should I have him here?" Spock asked at last.

The doctor's features relaxed. It had not been an easy battle, but finally the Vulcan's caution had been transcended.

"As quickly as you can," he said resolutely. "We will

begin work as soon as you arrive."

"He is very old. The trip will be hard on him."

The doctor was firm.

"Then, for your sake as well as his, I hope it is not too late."

THIS I OFFER

Eyes that see but do not laugh
Mouth that eats but knows no taste
Hands that touch but can not feel
Passion aroused not to be sated
Mind to continue life to go on
This I can offer you
This and my love

Kirk's quarters were ominously quiet when Spock returned. The usual classical music that the Captain preferred was missing, and the only sounds came from the soft static and occasional beeping of the telecommunicator which had been left running. Spock walked over to it and flicked it off and then stood a moment, just listening.

After a minute he heard the soft, muted rasps of someone sleeping in the next room. He sighed in relief and walked toward the sounds. They were low and slowly rhythmic, the murmurs of a man laboring to breathe as he slept.

Kirk lay in a lump on the bed. His bedclothes were in disarray and damply stuck to him. Large clumps of grey hair had become plastered with sweat to the side of his face. Tenderly, Spock leaned over him and smoothed his hair back in place with his fingers. Being with the old man like this made him feel alienated and alone, and immediately he tried to shrug off the impressions. This old and infirm man was James Kirk, his captain and brother, and the Vulcan's loyalty stood true and firm whether Kirk was the young captain of his memories or the declining victim unconscious before him.

Finally, Spock touched Kirk's arm to awaken him. At first, there was no response, then slowly the old eyes flickered and opened.

"Captain, it is I, Spock."

Childlike, Kirk rubbed his eyes with his fist.

"Spock, you're back?"

"Yes, Captain. Are you all right?"

"Fine. Fine. Just dozed off for a few minutes. I felt a little tired." Spock helped him to sit up. For a man who had just taken a rest, he looked haggard and exhausted. "The heat is unbearable sometimes. Look at me." He wiped the sweat from his face with his pajama sleeve. "One minute I'm freezing to death in here, the next minute they're trying to broil me alive."

Kirk's statement worried Spock. Drastic temperature shifts were common symptoms of men who suffered like Kirk from acute terminal maladies.

In another minute or two, Kirk was sitting comfortably in bed, his pillows puffed up behind him by Vulcan hands. The old man eyed the alien almost piercingly, searching for a clue as to what he had to say.

"Well, Spock, well?" Kirk questioned.

Spock sat near the bed and leaned forward.

"Captain, it is arranged," he said simply.

"You did it? Just like that?" Kirk was surprised.

"Spock leaned back in his chair. "Not just like that, Captain. I have been gone for three weeks."

"Oh, so you have, Spock," Kirk said, rubbing his chin with his finger.

"Did you read the materials I sent you, Captain?" He could see tapes of the Ambrose papers laying on a table near the bed.

"Oh, everything looks fine, Spock. I do have a couple trepidations though. The eating and drinking business for instance. A Starfleet Admiral has to attend a lot of Federation banquets you know and...well, I suppose temperance would be the order of the day. Wouldn't want the little bag to overflow, would we?" He chuckled as he imagined it. "You know, I think I'll consult Bones about this. He's sure to have some opinions."

"I've already consulted Dr. McCoy on the matter, Captain."

Kirk's eyes lit up. "That's fine, Spock. If McCoy approves of an unconventional method like this, he must see it as quite beneficial."

Spock remained silent. Then he said, "Are your clothes packed and ready, sir?"

Kirk answered absent-mindedly. "Clothes? Oh, yes, yes. Some nice young woman came this morning. Everything's ready. Just think, Spock, when I come back to this place, everything will be the same but me. I'll be looking at the world through new eyes. I'll be able to do everything I used to do again. There won't be anything I can't do. When Starfleet sees me, I just know they'll reinstate me. Why, they'll pull me out of retirement so fast it'll make your ears burn. I might even end up on the ENTERPRISE again."

There was no response from the Vulcan. Kirk frowned.

"Well, what's the matter with you, man? I know Vulcans don't jump up and down for joy, but you look like you've got indigestion."

"Quite the contrary, Captain. I am extremely pleased. After all, it was my idea to explore the possibilities on Vitalis IV in the first place. It's gratifying to see your

enthusiasm."

"Well, that's better, Spock." Kirk's eyes sparkled again. "I thought maybe you had changed your mind about wanting me around for the next twenty years."

"No, Captain. I haven't changed my mind..."

He wanted to speak out, to say more, to caution Kirk, but he could not. He wanted Kirk to live more than anything he had ever wanted. And he was determined to do everything in his power to accomplish that feat.

The trip back to Vitalis IV was uneventful, except that with each passing day Jim Kirk's fervor for the process increased. The enthusiasm Kirk always displayed for the project nagged at Spock. It gratified him, yet bathed him in guilt at the same time. During sleepless nights, Spock poured over the Vitalis IV papers again and again, much past the point of memorizing its long passages.

Compulsively, he picked apart and analyzed the project's techniques in search of a fatal flaw that could mark early doom for the Captain. As thorough as the Vulcan mind could be in dissection, he found no flaws, no reason why they should turn back. If the old man could just hold on a few days longer... Spock remembered Ambrose's warning to get the Captain there as quickly as possible and he also remembered the failures that occurred because subjects were brought in too late.

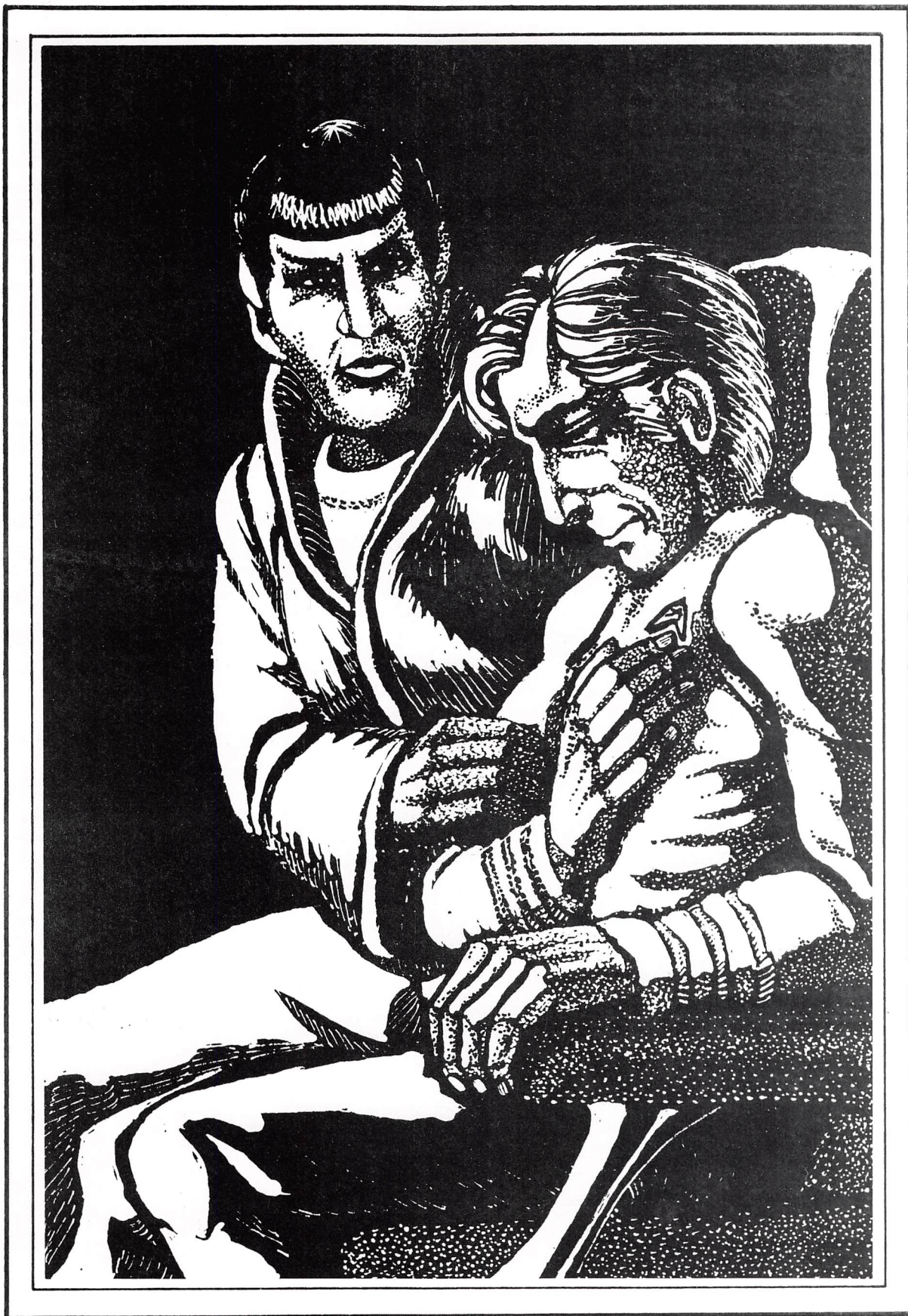
Spock looked kindly at the Captain who sat asleep in his chair. It was a blessing for the old man to doze off now and then when the pain in his joints became unbearable or the palpitations of his weakened heart left him breathless and pale. It amazed Spock to see that Kirk never complained about his aches or pains. The thought of a new life waiting for him on Vitalis IV seemed to revitalize him frequently and keep him functioning.

When Kirk fell asleep for an especially long period, Spock would sometimes go to him and nudge his stooped shoulder to wake him for fear that he could not awaken by himself. And more than once on the trip, Kirk confided that he feared going to sleep and never waking up.

After one such episode, Kirk approached Spock on a personal level.

"Spock," the Captain said seriously, "Please bear with me...but, I must thank you--"

"That is unnecessary, Captain."



"Wait, wait. I must do it now before...While I am still an old man, a dying man." He chose his words carefully. "I know that the arrangements must have been almost impossible to procure. I don't know exactly how you did it. I suppose I'll never know. But, Spock, my friend, you will never realize the depth of my gratitude. I am a man who knows what it's like to be totally helpless, virtually in the jaws of Death. Then, to have a savior redeem my soul through his own personal merit and none of my own...I don't know what this has cost you, Spock..."

Spock felt the flush of embarrassment flood him. He turned away. "Please, Jim, the money is not important--"

"Not money, Spock. Not money. What it's cost you inside." He gently touched his own chest. "In your heart, the emotional price."

The Vulcan faced the old man again. "Captain Kirk, you seem to be confused regarding my motivations. You are a man who has attained the rank of Starfleet Admiral; you are the finest Starship captain of our generation. You are of immense value to the Federation, if for nothing else, as a teacher for future generations of Starfleet officers. You are my friend, Jim, that is true. But I have no ulterior motive for making these arrangements other than for the benefit of the Federation and because you so desire them."

If the situation were not so serious, Kirk might have been amused. "All right, Spock, all right. Have it your way." Kirk knew from long experience that it did no good to pursue a subject along these lines with Spock. When the Vulcan had decided on a logical reason for his actions, that reason was sufficient and there was nothing more to be discussed. Further argument was pointless.

There was almost no other communication of this type for the duration of the flight. Only Spock's consistent night and day vigil over the Captain proved his concern. Sometimes he reminisced with Kirk, but more often than not, the old gentleman slept away the hours while the alien watched solicitously in silence.

"You're like a faithful old watchdog," Kirk told Spock one afternoon. "You may look like you're dozing, but you've always got one ear cocked for signs of trouble."

"Interesting analogy, Captain."

"I hope I haven't offended you, Mr. Spock," Kirk remarked gallantly.

"On the contrary, sir. I know that on your planet the image you described connotes exceptional loyalty, strength and a sense of duty. Those are admirable traits, and I realize

your intention is to compliment rather than offend."

Spock's response made Kirk smile to himself. For all the years he had known the Vulcan, he had never quite gotten used to having every one of his statements analyzed to a fine point. Often it annoyed him to have to think hard before speaking to Spock in order to avoid any misunderstanding. But this time, under these circumstances, he found his friend's quick analysis amusing, almost charming. It was during these benevolent moments that Kirk loved Spock best.

Kirk vividly remembered the nightmare of the night before. Grim images of dancing demons and hooded Death bedecked in black writhing and twisting about him in monstrous horror made him scream and lash out in the darkness. In the evil dimness, a flash of light brighter than anything imagined shone through and a deep voice called to him strongly. The voice pulled him from the blackness and led him crying and convulsing up the sharp-edged walls of Hell to the source of that light. It seemed to take an hour for him to crawl toward the voice, but when he awoke, the reality of the dream quickly vanished and the sight of Spock's face and chest only inches from his own made him gasp and moan with relief.

"Captain, wake up," Spock repeated. "You're having a nightmare." Spock's voice quivered slightly and was husky from sleep.

Kirk tried to sit up.

"My God, Spock, you wouldn't believe how horrible it was. Great galloping demons on my face, in my hair like gnats, pulling and pushing...and Lucifer himself gambling for my soul!" He wanted to grab Spock and hold on for dear life.

The Vulcan took Kirk's shoulders and pushed his stiff body back down into the pillows. The old man gasped weakly and collapsed like a ragdoll.

"Are you all right, Captain? You cried out several times."

It was all Kirk could do to nod.

"It was simply a nightmare. They can be truly frightening, I know. Sometimes it helps if you think about something more pleasant." The Vulcan watched him closely.

Kirk shuddered. "I'll try that, Mr. Spock," he murmured, rolling his eyes.

Spock noticed the time. Two hours from then would be his normal time for awakening. "Would you like me to stay up awhile with you?"

The old man nodded slowly.

"Then give me a moment to get dressed."

Kirk smiled, finally noticing that Spock was naked. "I got you up pretty fast, I guess."

"Yes. When I first heard you cry out, I jumped up as fast as I could to turn on the lights. It took me a rather long time to awaken you."

"That's because you were part of my dream." He saw Spock's slight frown. "No, no, not as one of the devils, though I'm surprised I didn't die of fright when I woke up and saw those pointed ears less than six inches from my face."

"I hope you can tell me apart from Lucifer by now, Captain," the Vulcan said agreeably, as he got up and walked across the room into the shadow to find his clothing.

"Yes, Mr. Spock, I think I can," Kirk replied faintly.

Once again the old man leaned back on his bed and waited for his friend's return. He closed his eyes and heard the soft rustlings of shirt and pants being assumed by a spirit Spock in the ghostly world of this ship. The gentle sounds were eerie in the darkness, but they made him feel secure and comfortable, all the same.

Spock returned shortly and sat down close to the Captain. They talked in quiet tones until fatigue stole the old man gently away. Spock watched Kirk sleep for a few minutes, then turned off the light and moved from the elderly figure back to his own bed. He lay there alone, eyes closed, completely clothed, for what seemed to be hours, breathing softly in the dying night.

It was like this for James Kirk during the entire journey: moments of severe emotional jeopardy followed by deep sensations of security and invulnerability. For Spock, feelings of dread and loss plagued him. He knew the Ambrose process could not fail, yet time and again, after seeing Captain Kirk's suffering, he could not help but think that there was just not enough time.

Compulsively his head ticked off the hours and minutes. Even when they were talking together and everything seemed normal, time was a constant factor on the alien's consciousness. There was no peaceful sleep for the Vulcan on this return trip, only the fear of time and continual feelings of helplessness.

Only on the seventh day, when the chartered ship was orbiting Vitalis IV, did Spock lose his notions of apprehension. Somehow they had both endured the long confinement and the Captain's spirits were as high as ever. Before, the definite feasibility of his plan kept Spock progressing rapidly and in emotional order. Now, the inevitable actuality of the Ambrose

process hit him hard, so that for the very first time, Spock knew without a doubt he could not fail.

Just as before, Spock found a small delegation waiting on the receiving platform of the Vitalis IV entrance compound. As he stepped out of the shuttlecraft, he could see their eager faces as they huddled together impatiently, like a small flock of chickens. They chatted idly for a minute, until, one by one, they saw him come away from the small craft towards them.

"Welcome once again, Mr. Spock." It was the same young man, Martin Carson, who greeted him the first time. He peeked around Spock's shoulder. "You brought the subject with you, I presume?"

"I have brought Admiral Kirk with me, yes," Spock said, a slight hint of indignation in his voice.

As he spoke, two attendants came out of the small craft with Kirk. The Captain was lying on an airstretcher, and the two men pushed it carefully in front of them.

The young man spoke to his colleagues. "Oh, my. He looks serious. We had better put a rush on this one."

Quickly they moved the stretcher into the building and down the same corridor Spock had been taken through on his first visit. The group moved rank and file, with the young man leading, Spock following at Kirk's head, and the rest walking strategically behind and beside the stretcher. When they got to a door marked "Level One", it opened and the entire entourage turned and entered the room.

"You may come with me now," the young man said, taking Spock's arm.

"I would prefer to wait here with Admiral Kirk."

The young man looked impatient. "There is no need. We'll be putting him under shortly."

The pale Kirk rustled softly in awareness. Trembling fingers reached out and took Spock's hand.

"It's all right, Mr. Spock. Go on. Everything is going to be fine now." His smile was weak but steady.

As Spock leaned down to the old man's face, a nurse quickly injected Kirk's shoulder with a heavy tranquilizer. Suddenly Kirk's eyes widened with a rush, then blinked, and settled back to normal.



Spock whispered in his ear. "I can stay longer with you, Captain. If you're..." He stopped and closed his eyes.

"I'm not afraid, Spock," Kirk said slowly. "I've been waiting for this day for a long time. I'm ready." His tired eyes fluttered a bit before he drifted off to sleep. Only then did his grip on Spock's hand relax.

The young man led Spock away. "You see that Admiral Kirk has no misgivings about our process. Why should you?"

"I have no misgivings about the process either, sir. I simply want assurance that the Admiral is completely comfortable."

Spock left the room with a heavy heart.

"Oh, I assure you he's comfortable. We're going to run a lot of tests on him now, but he won't feel a thing. We've got to determine before hand whether the subject's--I mean Admiral Kirk's--brain is allergic to any of the materials we plan to use in his Ambrobody. We must also perform certain chronoscopic tests to determine his brain's reaction time to

specific stimuli. That way the Ambrobody can be tuned to the calibrated responses of the tests results."

"How long do you plan for these tests to take?"

"As long as necessary to get exact calibrations, Mr. Spock. If we ignore or make a mistake in any of the one-hundred different units of response, the Ambrobody will operate inconsistently with the Admiral's natural personality. An error could result in anything from motor aphasia to hallucinations. So you see we must be thorough and that takes time."

"Admiral Kirk is very weak. I do not believe he can survive a great deal of strain."

"The strain," Martin Carson repeated. "Yes, there is strain. Most people survive it..." He let it go at that.

Spock walked beside him in silence, lost in thought. The clock in his head continued to tick off the minutes as though for a countdown.

"Here are your quarters," the young man said as he stopped. Another door slid open effortlessly and they walked in. The suite was not spacious but looked comfortable enough.

"Everything you need is right here and if there is anything further you require, feel free to call the director's station. I ask you to remain here until we contact you."

With that he turned and quickly walked out, leaving Spock quite alone in his room.

For the next few hours, Spock sat silently in a chair, eyes dead ahead watching nothing, hands folded grimly in his lap. The strain on his face was apparent, the creases deepening as the hours dragged on. At one point a young woman brought him food, but he sent her away. His mind was so heavily burdened that his body's cry for nourishment went unheeded. This waiting was worse than the terrible apprehension he suffered on the entire return trip. In desperation he tried to make telepathic contact with Captain Kirk. But even with his most intense efforts, his mind could not grasp even a single image or feeling from the Captain's subconscious. Helplessly he tried to meditate, to let the cares and worries of the last few weeks fade into blessed contentment, but again and again his thoughts always came back to one thing. Jim in danger. The familiar agony gnawed at the pit of his stomach like it had so many times on the ENTERPRISE. Jim was in danger now and he had to do something about it, or he would surely jump out of his skin.

After hours of battering anguish, he finally broke down. He had been staring at the intercom unit on the wall. Resolutely he went over to it and contacted the director's office.

"This is Spock. I am inquiring as to the situation regarding Admiral James T. Kirk."

The voice at the other end was curt. "Admiral Kirk is still in Test Control. I have no further information."

"Then let me speak to Test Control," Spock requested firmly.

"I'm sorry. That is against the rules, sir."

Spock's agitation was becoming more pronounced. "I want to see Ambrose now, in my quarters. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear, sir. But Dr. Ambrose is in conference at this time, after which I am sure he would be happy--"

Spock cut her off with a slap of his hand on the controls. For a moment he stood there, his weight against the wall. The impetus of his action had left him drained and disappointed in himself. He must not let his unforeseen reaction forecast his behavior for the rest of the ordeal. No one was expected to be perfect except a Vulcan half-breed who had taught himself out of necessity to be just that. For Spock, survival meant strict adherence to the Vulcan philosophy of self-control, and yet here and now, it was becoming more and more difficult even to practice as simple a discipline as patience.

Soon the buzzer to his quarters sounded and Dr. Ambrose himself walked in. He found Spock sitting deep in thought.

"Mr. Spock, I hear you're upset." The doctor was the perfect patronizer. "My good fellow, it does no good whatsoever to worry yourself to a frazzle over this thing. I've just come from Test Control and your Admiral Kirk is doing quite nicely. These procedures take time, that's all. You'll be notified as soon as they are finished."

Spock glared at him. "Dr. Ambrose, as a scientist myself, I am requesting to be allowed to view the testing procedures."

"Impossible," the little man said indifferently.

"Then, sir, I must protest on the grounds--"

"There is no one to protest to," Ambrose cut in. "We have gone through this before, Spock. There will be no errors committed here because you feel a need to rush us. If you had brought the Admiral to us much earlier instead of waiting until he was in such a deteriorated condition, you would not be languishing with worry for him, and I would still be in my conference undisturbed. Now please, I have taken your warning from our last conversation, and I will not have the spotless reputation of my clinic soiled by the high-handed ravings of a second-string Federation hireling, even if he is a Vulcan!"

He did not wait for Spock's reaction before turning on his heels and walking out.

A man of great dignity and pride, the Vulcan Spock did not know what it was to shout out in anger or let jealousy consume all reason. However, there were few times in his adult life when he had had to take such verbal abuse from any civilized being--not that he considered Dr. Ambrose civilized. The doctor's emotional attack seemed not only malevolent but political in nature as well, a sort of power-play for no logical reason.

Spock shook his head and went over to the bed to lie down. He simply was not used to being treated with such blatant disrespect, and he did not know quite how to react to it at all. Perhaps he had been on edge and emotional. He sharply remembered the incident at the intercom station. Perhaps Dr. Ambrose did deserve an apology. If he received one, Spock reasoned, it might pacify him enough to allow an observer in the Test Control Section.

He lay on the bed, the fingers of both hands laced behind his head, wondering at the irony of his own politically maneuvering thoughts. It bothered him that the situation had him trapped so conclusively.

For three long days, Spock stayed in his room, mostly lying on the bed, lost in his own private thoughts. The minutes and hours passed, gaining and losing in his mind, like a clock spinning wildly out of control. His thoughts had no structure but took him, time-traveling, backwards and forwards through an eternity of space. He neither ate nor slept for this duration and felt no need for either. Instead, his memory, recollections and expectations consumed his entire being in an attempt to deal logically with the situation at hand.

On the afternoon of the third day, the entrance buzzer to his quarters sounded and Dr. Ambrose came in unescorted. The little man in white stood in the center of the room alone, saying nothing.

In an instant, Spock had swung his legs off the bed and was on his feet.

"What's wrong? Is the Admiral all right?"

Ambrose faced him cautiously. "The Admiral is doing as well as can be expected, but--"

"But what?"

The doctor shifted his weight nervously. "But he is deteriorating rapidly. I have three full-time staff crews working around the clock on his Ambrobody. However, time is working against us, Spock." He shook his head. "I have no desire to lose Admiral Kirk." He saw Spock's eyebrows move

sharply. "I have no desire to lose any of my clients, believe me. I am here to prepare you, that's all."

Spock moved across the room and sat down at the desk. "The testing, Doctor, is it finished?"

"The testing is completed, Mr. Spock. In fact it was quite successful. Your Admiral Kirk has a rather dynamic personality."

Spock sighed to himself remembering countless instances of that fact. "I realize that, Doctor."

The little man went to where Spock was sitting and leaned close to him.

"We are doing everything possible, Spock. I am pushing my people almost beyond their limits. We are prepared to keep his body artificially alive if we have to."

"But you don't need his body, you need his brain."

"Precisely. When brain waves cease, it's all over."

"Thank you, Dr. Ambrose," Spock said easily, realizing that at least this particular wait was over. "I appreciate the time and effort that has been spent on Admiral Kirk's behalf. May I see him now?"

The doctor moved away. "Of course. He is back in his own room now. You may spend as much time with him as you wish until his Ambrobody is ready."

Spock rose and they walked out to the corridor together. Dr. Ambrose lead the Vulcan down long narrow hallways toward Kirk's recovery quarters. As Ambrose passed, the technicians in the corridor greeted him respectfully and some stopped completely to let the two men proceed. When they finally reached the designated entrance, Ambrose hesitated, then took Spock's arm.

"Mr. Spock, may I ask you a personal question?"

"I suppose so."

"If Admiral Kirk dies, if we cannot save him, what will you do? Will you be assigned to another Federation Admiral?" The doctor had mistakenly attributed Spock's loyalty to duty alone.

Spock almost smiled. "No, I will not be reassigned. My duty is a life-long one, regarding Admiral Kirk. But, Dr. Ambrose, I have no intention of giving it up now. This process, your process, will be successful. Of that, I am certain."

"How can you be so sure? I am the inventor of this process and I'm telling you, your Admiral Kirk is failing fast!"

Spock's gaze was piercing. "Perhaps it would be wiser for you to expend your energies in preparation for the Admiral's operation, Doctor, instead of taking up my time with unrequested forecasts of failure."

Once again, Spock had made the doctor's blood boil. With a huff, he turned and stormed away down the corridor and disappeared through a door.

Admiral Kirk's room was dark and deadly still, yet when Spock came through the door, the old man felt as if the whole room were filled with light and music. His eyes sparkled, damp with moisture.

"Spock, I'm still alive," he joked feebly. "They haven't done me in yet."

"Captain, it is their job to keep you alive." Spock was visably relieved to hear the Captain's little joke.

Jim Kirk focused on Spock's haggard features. "Ah, yes, so it is. Are you all right? You look tired. How long has it been?"

"They have been testing you for three days."

"And you haven't eaten or slept for those three days, have you?"

"That does not matter, Captain. What does matter is that you must do everything in your power to preserve your strength until after the operation."

Kirk's face clouded over. "Am I in bad shape, Spock? Do you think I'll die soon?"

Spock shook his head. "I know you will not die, Captain. After all, you are Admiral James T. Kirk of the United Federation of Planets. You are the commander of--"

"Spock," he stopped him. "I am Jim Kirk, human being, and just like everyone else in the universe, humans die when their bodies fail them."

Spock looked worried.

"Captain, Death has no real substance. It is simply a mirage. You must not recognize it as a possibility anymore."

"That's a little hard to do, especially since you just said..."

"I did not mean to alarm you. I only meant to inform you of the nature of the situation. The Ambrobody will be ready in a few days. Until then I think it best for you to rest quietly and to have no doubts in your mind regarding the success of the operation."

"The power of positive thinking, eh?"

"I believe someone coined that phrase in the 20th century, Captain. But it does have valid meaning today."

The Captain grew quiet. "I do want to live, Spock, more than anything..."

The days passed slowly but steadily. Eventually the inevitable happened. Kirk and Spock were notified that the Ambrobody was ready and available for viewing before the operation. Like a child promised a new bicycle for his birthday, Kirk's spirits were high and Spock was satisfied with the Captain's healthy attitude. After hours, days, weeks of worry, the Vulcan felt himself relax. The agony of the time spent in making the arrangements and traveling back and forth to Vitalis IV was over. Soon Jim Kirk would be young, strong and able, just as before, just as Spock remembered him. Soon he would have his Captain back.

Early the next morning, a nurse bundled James Kirk warmly in an airchair and he and Spock traveled the project's endless corridors behind Dr. Ambrose.

"I simply can't believe that we've made it this far, Spock," Kirk said with relish. "It seems I've been waiting for this day forever."

Dr. Ambrose was ecstatic.

"Wait till you see it, Mr. Spock. It's a masterpiece! The detailing is so precise--but," he acknowledged humbly, "that is for you and Admiral Kirk to judge."

"I am anxious to see your masterpiece, Doctor," Spock answered in a pleasant voice. "I, too, have been waiting for this day."

"Spock, think of it," the Captain continued. "By tomorrow --isn't that right, Doctor, you did say the operation could be performed tomorrow?" The doctor nodded joyously. "By tomorrow, I'll be my old self again. I'll be a young Jim Kirk, but with all the experience and knowledge that these last few decades have brought me. I'll be perfect Federation material again. I'll be better than perfect."

The doctor jumped in. "So you shall, sir. Maybe not exactly on the first day, but I assure you when your rehabilitation period is over, you'll be a new man with a better body than you've ever had in your life."

"Spock, Spock," Kirk almost whispered, motioning for the Vulcan to come closer. They stopped for a moment. "You'll come with me, won't you?"

Spock was puzzled. "Where, Captain?"

"To Starfleet Command and the Federation. You'll help me present my case for reinstatement. I promise you that you'll be with me on whatever vessel they give me to command."

"That is quite impossible, Captain."

Kirk was insistent. "Forget your damn science project. You were meant to be on a starship, not locked up in a stuffy office on some subsidized planet somewhere. What do you say?"

Spock stiffened and walked two paces away from Kirk before turning and facing him again.

"Captain Kirk, perhaps it would be better to concentrate

on one obstacle at a time. Of course, the future is open, but it is up to you to set your own limitations and possibilities. The doctor's first concern here on Vitalis IV is to see that you and your new Ambrobody are compatible as an entity. Believe me, all of your time from now on will be spent working towards that goal. All future plans must remain secondary considerations for a while."

Spock glanced at the doctor who was listening intently.

"Of course, Mr. Spock, I understand," Kirk answered. "And, as usual, you're quite right. There will be plenty of time later to deal with the Federation." He motioned them forward. "Let's get on with it."

They continued moving toward a large door at the far end of the corridor. When they reached it, the entrance opened and all three of them went in. It was a large room, half laboratory, half office, with shining white walls and sleek chrome fixtures. The place looked new, as though the three men were the very first ever to have entered it. Kirk went on ahead, while Dr. Ambrose held Spock back.

"Mr. Spock," he said cautiously, "no one knows just how an Ambrobody will perform under stress. Starfleet Command may never accept a man in Admiral Kirk's condition to serve as commander of one of its vessels. I don't think he is fully aware of the Ambrobody's limitations."

"Of course he is, Doctor. You explained them yourself."

"I explained them to you."

"He has read all existing written information on the Ambrobody process and I have talked to him at length about the procedure. I have even provided him with all published Starfleet data on your project. There is no doubt in my mind that he understands. He is human, that's all, and susceptible to excitability."

The two men faced each other in killing silence.

"Doctor," Kirk called back to them. "I don't mean to interrupt the little symposium between Mr. Spock and yourself, but I am anxious to see the 'new' Jim Kirk. I hope that's not asking too much."

The doctor moved quickly toward the Captain. "Oh, not at all, sir. Sorry to keep you waiting. Mr. Spock and I were just discussing your wonderful attitude. It's quite encouraging."

Throwing a backward glance at Spock, he walked past the sitting man and moved behind a desk-like table. He pushed a button and talked down into a small communicator.

"We are ready in here, Mr. Nelson. You may bring Admiral

Kirk's Ambrobody into the prime viewing area."

Spock came forward to stand by Captain Kirk.

In a minute a concealed door near the rear of the room opened and two white-uniformed attendants came in. They pushed a large oblong box on an airstretcher, which glided effortlessly across the room toward the expectant men.

"Fine, gentlemen, that's fine. Bring it right up here," the doctor motioned. They placed it about three meters in front of Kirk. There was almost a feeling of electricity in the room, Ambrose had felt it quite often with other clients but it was a totally new experience for the Captain and Spock. For a moment no one made a sound.

One of the attendants held a small silver cube in his hand. When he saw Dr. Ambrose nod to him, he pushed one of the buttons on the top of the cube. Automatically, the top and front section of the long oblong box tilted up and back.

Inside, like a precious gem resting in an over-sized jewel case, lay the Ambrobody tagged JAMES T. KIRK I. The naked body lay perfectly still on the table, covered only by a thin white cloth draped carefully across the hips and groin. What they saw was an exact duplicate of a sleeping Jim Kirk, just as Spock remembered him, just as Jim Kirk remembered himself. The Captain's eyes grew wide with wonder and he craned his neck to get a better view.

Dr. Ambrose beamed. Of the hundred Ambrobodies he had created in his lifetime, none had pleased him more than this one. In his youth, James Kirk was an extremely handsome man, and the sight of this same man lying peacefully in repose sent a small chill up the doctor's back. Of all his Ambrobodies, this one begged to be activated; this one, more than any of the others, seemed to capture the spirit, the humanity that the subject Kirk possessed in his youth. Looking at it made them expect it to rise quickly from its sleep and rush off to fulfill a commitment in the name of honor and integrity.

Spock's mind was practically reeling from the unaccustomed gladness. He had always set his expectations high, but this creation was more than even he had ever hoped for. He wanted to bypass the man sitting in the chair next to him and rush to the sleeping Kirk and awaken him. It was almost more than he could do to remain at his place.

To get a better view of the Ambrobody, Kirk activated his airchair and moved it slowly toward the reclining figure. He knew the reaction he was supposed to be having was one of elation, but for some reason he felt something close to apprehension instead.

It was eerie looking at an early-image of himself like

this. The android radiated a profound innocence that arose unmistakably from the remarkable refinement of its construction. The face, smooth and free of wrinkles. The hair, golden-brown just as he remembered it to be. It was truly a younger Jim Kirk, only sleeping, dreaming about adventures in space.

He looked at it earnestly and then touched it. The tan skin felt soft and smooth to his touch, and he could even feel the contour of hard muscles below the surface flesh. Qualities of youth and strength exuded from the skin in an unexplained aura. This creature made him loathe himself as he examined his own arms and face unconsciously.

Dr. Ambrose nodded again to the attendant who made certain adjustments to his control device. Kirk was almost startled when he saw the Ambrobody move slightly, silently on the table. Spock's eyebrows shot rapidly upward in response to the same sight.

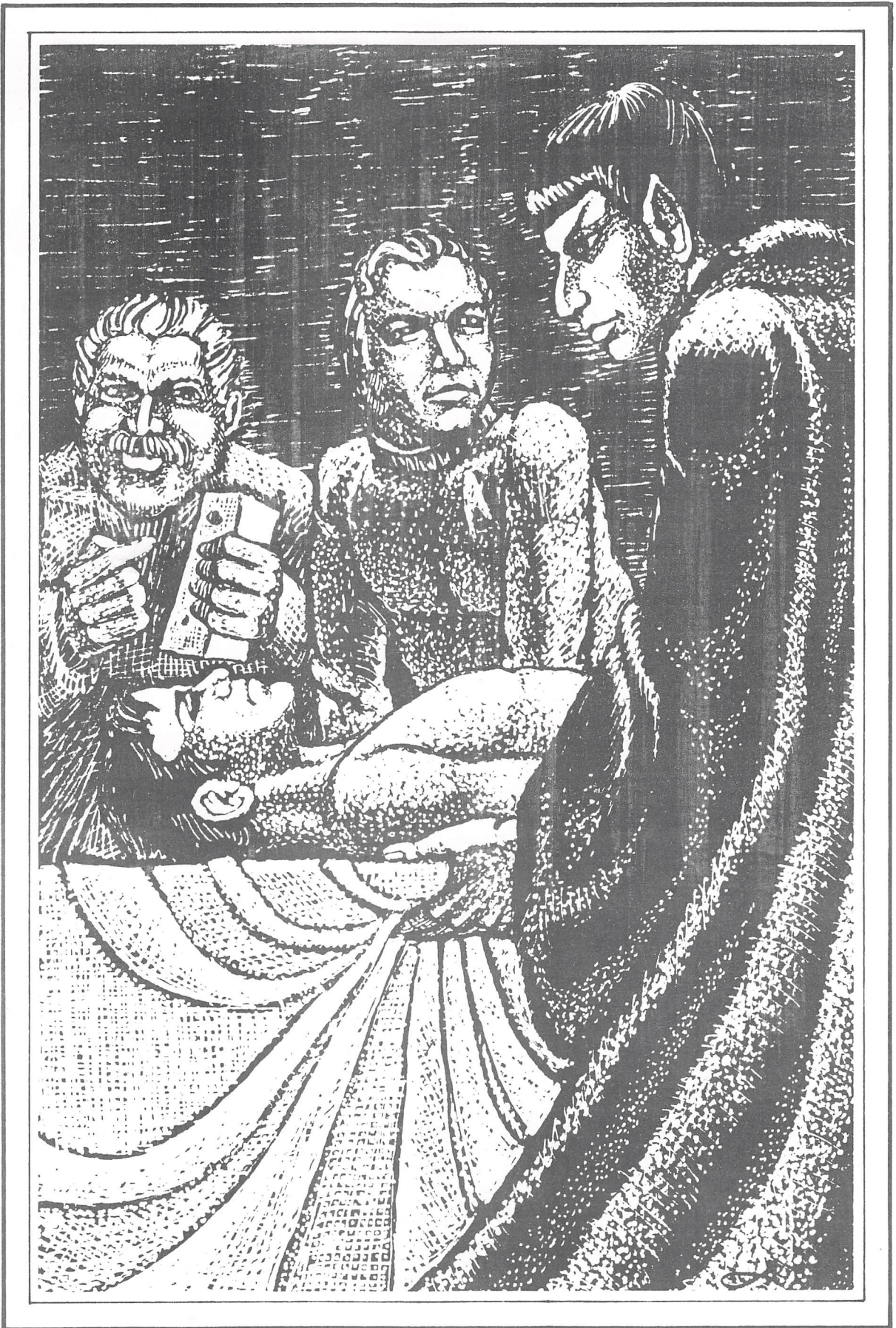
The reclining "Jim Kirk" embarked on a preplanned group of set responses. It pivoted its head slowly from side to side, then raised it and looked around. Then it lowered its head and raised its right forearm upward to its full extension before bringing it down again. The movements were not graceless or mechanical, but smooth and flowing, exactly like the human movements it tried to imitate. But to Kirk's mind there was something unnatural about it, like a creature trapped between life and death in a world where both were the accepted norm. He remembered another time long ago aboard the ENTERPRISE, another android Jim Kirk, so similar in appearance to this one, yet undeniably misguided and deadly.

Though a revulsion passed through him, a powerful compulsion forced him to touch it again. It was beautiful; he was beautiful. His hand moved uncontrollably from the soft face down the bare, smooth chest to the hips. The sensations were so familiar, so magnificently familiar, that he almost could not bear to remove his hand. For a fleeting moment, he once again wished to discard his old body, to throw out the useless and replace it with the strength and beauty he had found here.

He had seen a thousand of them before...androids...creations so like humans a man could not distinguish between the two. He remembered Roger Corby's desirable Andrea, and Norman and the Alice series on Mudd's planet, the distant cousins of the android lying before him--perfect beings--all of them, perfect, except for one thing...

He sat for a minute contemplating the Ambrobody before his eyes, wishing he could feel differently about it. Abruptly, that didn't matter; he felt his face and arms grow livid. He could not, absolutely would not, reject his own body. Suddenly, the "thing" on the table was horrible.

Kirk's head turned impulsively from left to right, searching



for an acquiescent response from the others. Stupid grins masked the faces of the doctor and the two attendants. Spock was standing beside him bathed in self-satisfaction. Didn't he realize that this thing was a prison?--Kirk thought out in anger.

Kirk loved his own body. It had been good to him. He had traveled the galaxy from one end to the other with this body, and he would not desert it now. He would not give it up to be placed in a shell. He would not allow Spock's insane logic to trap him forever.

"No. No. I won't let you do this to me, Spock," Kirk shook his head.

Spock did not understand. "Captain?"

Kirk waved his hands slowly in front of his chest.

"Take it away."

"Captain...please..."

"What the hell are you trying to do to me?" Kirk asked in bewilderment. "Look at it, Spock. It's not even breathing. It will never breathe. It's nothing but a disgustingly empty case." He began to rub his own thin arms unconsciously. "This is me. This body...is...mine!"

The doctor was indignant.

"Admiral Kirk, much of my personal time and effort, not to mention that of my staff, has gone into this creation for you. It is one of a kind. It is a veritable masterpiece! You must accept it."

Kirk still shook his head.

"I reject it."

One of the astounded attendants spoke up. "Sir, if you need a further demonstration, here, look." The small control cube he had in his hand was again activated. The Ambrobody began to sit up.

Kirk was seized with rage. "Do you really expect me to live twenty more years trapped in that thing? I won't do it. I'd rather be dead."

"And so you shall be, Captain." It was Spock speaking.

Kirk turned to the Vulcan. "Get this thing out of here."

The doctor began to speak frantically. "Spock, do something! Surely he can't be serious! He can't really reject a masterpiece!"

The other attendant, thinking he might be of some help, chirped in, "We can make any changes you prefer, sir. It will only take a short time. Is there something in the face, perhaps, to which you object?"

Kirk shut his eyes tight in horror.

"Spock, I'm holding you directly accountable," the doctor exclaimed firmly. "The Ambrobody is perfect. It does everything I said it would. You signed the contract here, not your precious Captain!"

Kirk's face was turning red and he began to cough. "That's right, you quack," he shouted, catching a fleeting breath. "Run to Spock. If you think he's going to get you out of this one, you're dead wrong. I've made my decision."

Spock did not understand the reason for Kirk's behavior, but he intended to find out. The old man's agitation had worsened with the presence of Ambrose and his attendants.

"Get out, Doctor." It was Spock speaking again, his tone cold as ice. "Leave us alone."

"What?" The doctor was aghast.

The assistants were appalled.

"Get out," Spock repeated.

The doctor stood in front of the Ambrobody as if to protect his creation.

"You can't throw me out of my own laboratory. I'll have you arrested, Spock."

Spock turned toward the doctor and restated his words.

"I said for you to get out and take both of them with you." He shoved the doctor firmly in the direction of the door.

"You're both mad. I'll have you both arrested! The Ambrobody is perfect! It's perfect!" The doctor's voice was threatening as he shouted, but he quickly gathered his attendants together and all three of them dashed out of the room.

Spock turned to the old man, ready for a confrontation.

"Now, Captain, I demand to know your exact objections to the Ambrobody."

Kirk yelled. "You demand to know? Ha! You Vulcan backstabber! You don't understand the first thing about me, do you? Why did you bring me here? Did you really think I would permit my brain to be placed in that robot?" He peered incredulously

into the Vulcan's stoic face, a face he knew as well as his own, or did he? "Spock, oh, Spock, you didn't think it, you assumed it. Don't you know I'd be trapped, a prisoner? You led me to believe...I thought I'd be able to command again..."

Spock's stomach dropped to his knees. "I never said that," he quickly interjected.

"No, you never said anything, did you? Surely you knew that Starfleet would never accept it. Why didn't you help me to see? Instead, you blinded me with your own selfish desires. You led me to believe I'd be my old self again." Kirk was in tears now.

"I wanted you to live, Captain." Spock rushed to Kirk, almost hurling himself at his feet. "You can't throw this away."

"Yes, yes, I know your great concern for the doctor's fine work," Kirk snapped sarcastically, as he turned his chair away.

"Forget the doctor, Jim, I want you to live."

"As a lasting testimony to your logic, eh, Spock? Look at Kirk, everybody...Spock's pet. I won't have it. I won't be reduced to that, Spock, not for you or anybody." He dropped his voice, as he turned to face the Vulcan. "Now take me back to my quarters."

"Not until we get this settled," the Vulcan said firmly.

"It is settled."

Spock rose like a Colossus over Kirk.

"It is not settled." Spock was near cracking. "You don't seem to understand, Jim. You are a dying man. You won't make it back to Earth. This is your only chance and I demand that you accept it."

Kirk was furious. How dare Spock command him! With renewed strength supplied by anger, the old man climbed from his chair and approached the reclining Ambrobody. He pulled the thing's arms over its head and with one killing effort pulled it away from its box. Spock watched horror-stricken as the body began to fall to the floor. As if in slow-motion, the head hit first, then the torso and finally the legs hit and bounced with a thud.

"That's what I think of your robot, Spock!" The old man turned and spat on it. All the disgust of his spirit reflected aloud in his words.

"I am human. I have dignity. I am part of a race of men that still has pride in itself. I do not belong to a race of computers." He looked right at Spock as if to take aim. "I am

not a creature who ruts like an animal." Even he knew he had gone too far.

"Don't push me, Captain." Spock could feel himself losing control, breaking apart.

Kirk, in his fury, continued. "I am not a man who feels nothing...nothing, like you! I feel all the time and I will not give up any part of that feeling for the next twenty years. Maybe you could be happy in a body that doesn't feel, but I can't be! I don't want to be a Vulcan! I want to feel! Do you hear me, you stupid Vulcan bastard!"

He began to beat Spock on the chest with his fists. Once, twice, three times.

Spock grabbed Kirk's hands, wanting to break his wrists. The old man was too angry to be frightened.

"I can make you do it," Spock growled, forcing Kirk to his knees. The old man began to sob from the pain in his wrists.

"You power-hungry machine!" Kirk cried out, pulling away. "You hate me, don't you, for rejecting your perfect logic. Can't you see that you are illogical? Do you really think that you can force me to deny my own nature? Oh, you're stronger, sure. You can even have that idiot dissect me and put me in that thing. But I swear to you, as soon as I wake up, as soon as I'm able, I'll take this wretched creation of yours and I'll kill it!"

Furious, Spock was angry and hurt enough to destroy the old man lying at his feet, as he would any insect. The unleashed power of the moment welled up in him like a devouring monster. He was a madman ready to kill at the slightest provocation. His wrath was so vicious, so out of control he could feel himself an inch away from pouncing on the defenseless figure.

He turned away from the prostrate Kirk and went two yards to a laboratory wall. He raised his right hand and sent it crashing against the stone-hard surface. His left hand followed, then his right, then his left, again and again. Reason was gone. All appearances of logic disappeared. The alien Spock was reduced to the howling animal Kirk referred to earlier.

Spock staggered to the far end of the room away from Kirk. He must get away or he would surely kill the old man or himself.

How could this happen? How did this terrible thing happen? His mind exploded with the knowledge that it had all been his doing.

You are not logical, his mind proclaimed to him. You are the embodiment of illogic. You have lied to yourself and to



everyone around you. You are not a reasonable man; you are fanatical, perverted and fraudulent. Your thinking is impulsive and emotional. You are a victim of your own illogic. You deserve everything that is happening.

All that he knew in certainty, all that he recognized as truth, all that he was, was gone. The anger and fear vanished and only a numbing shock remained. His head was spinning and his legs were so weak they no longer supported him. He suddenly felt himself dropping to the floor. Like a flash, the memory of Dr. McCoy's prediction of disaster flooded his brain. It was then he realized what had happened. He realized that he had lost his Captain forever.

The emotions that he had repressed all of his life suddenly overpowered him. He wanted to make the tears, to let himself finally cry, but he could not. Instead, he threw his head back and began to laugh. It was a horrible sound. It started down in the Vulcan's throat, a self-contemptuous snicker, then continued to roll out of his mouth, like a witch in convulsions. He had lost the control to stop.

Kirk was aghast. He was watching the destruction of his best friend, and he felt himself the cause of it. He picked himself up off the floor as best he could and went quickly to his fallen comrade. Spock still laughed uncontrollably and now tears squeezed out of his eyes.

"Stop it, Spock." Kirk grabbed two fistfuls of Spock's shirt and began shaking him. Kirk knew that if he did not bring Spock out of his delirium soon, the Vulcan's mind would snap forever. Spock's hands took hold of Kirk's wrists once again, in an attempt to free himself. Because he had none of his own, the old man feared Spock's strength, but he would not let go. Instead, the Vulcan was so weak, his arms collapsed away from Kirk and out to his sides.

"Stop it," Kirk shouted again. "Stop this!"

He slapped the Vulcan hard across the face. It did no good. Kirk hit him again. A small trace of green blood appeared at the corner of Spock's mouth. The expression on Spock's face was diabolical. There was no trace of intellect left. Kirk tried not to look at it, as he took Spock's bloody hands in his own. "Look what you've done to your hands. There was no need for you to go this far..."

In the old days, if this had happened, Kirk would have easily picked Spock up and deposited him on the nearest bed. Now, he was helplessly weak before the heavy hulk of the Vulcan.

"This is crazy, Spock. Believe me, I didn't mean to hurt you. I was angry, in a rage...You're hysterical; you've got to stop...please."

The laughter finally stopped and Spock collapsed in the Captain's arms.

"Oh, Spock, I never meant to hurt you like this..."

They remained on the floor together, the Vulcan cradled in the old man's arms. There were no tears from either of them, only moist eyes, and Kirk's gentle rocking of his fallen brother. For all the years he had known Spock he would never have suspected that anything like this could ever happen. Until this moment he had no idea of the physical hardships and emotional pressure that had gnawed at Spock's insides for all these weeks. Though Spock's uncontrollable laughter had stopped, the sound of it echoed in Kirk's brain.

"You've always been so strong, Spock," the old man whispered. "I always thought there was no limit to that strength."

For the next two hours there was no response from Spock. Mentally and physically the Vulcan was worn out, incapable of any sensory certainties. There were no emotions to master; he had no feelings and no thoughts to consider, for his mind was bitterly empty. Knowing nothing and feeling nothingness replaced the anger and self-loathing of before. Within his mind he was floating, bobbing, unanchored to any quondam beliefs, like a disembodied apparition of himself. Never in his life had he experienced anything quite like this, a hell halfway between life and death, lucidity and insanity. He could not speak but only curled up closer against the warm constraints of Kirk's body, trying to fold himself further into himself.

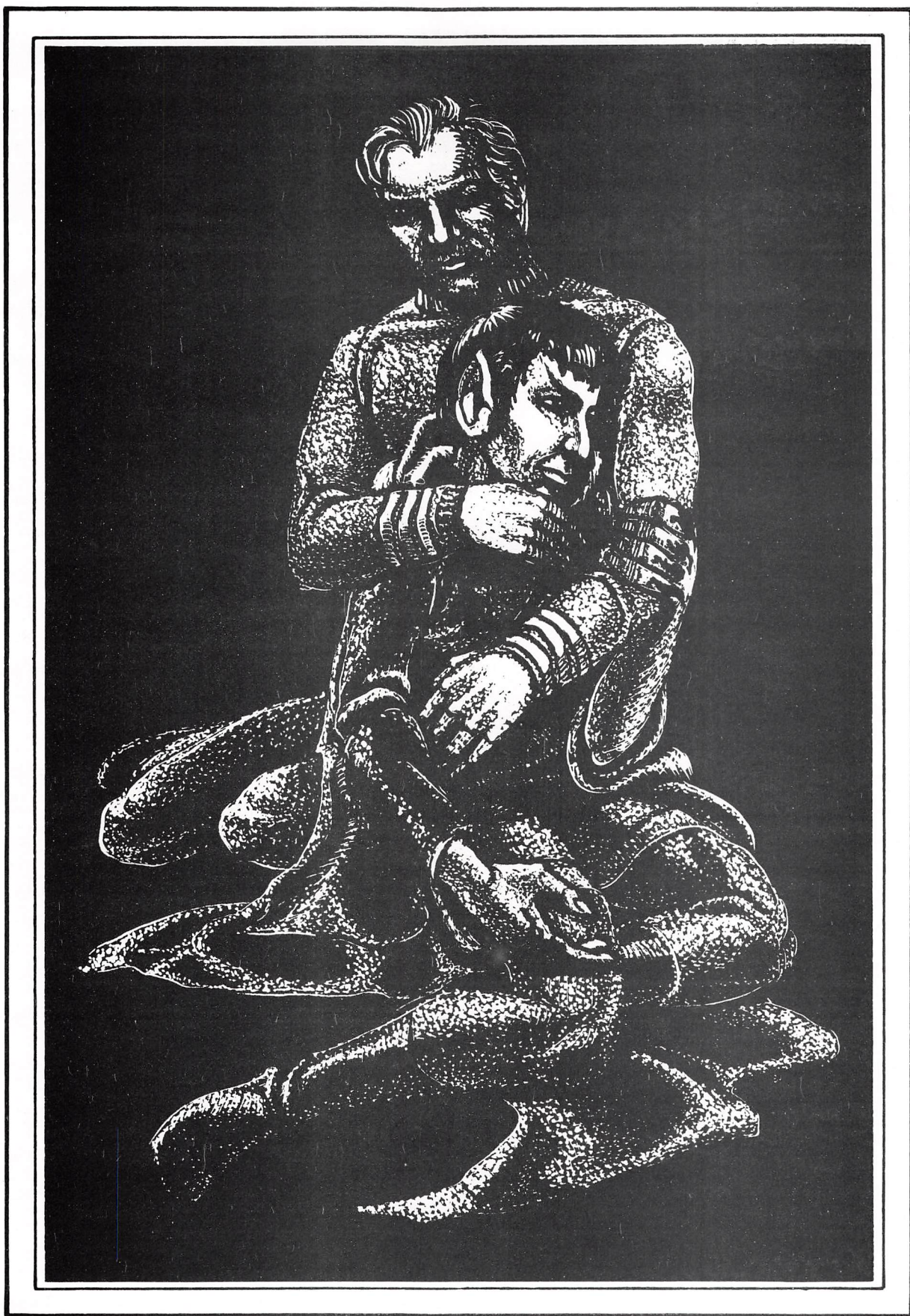
Kirk sat quietly waiting for Spock to recover. For him, the time passed quickly. His mind was full and active as he replayed the events of the last few weeks and especially those of that morning. When he thought of Spock's breakdown and his own terrible part in it, he was visibly moved. His fingers clutched Spock's shirt in spasms.

Occasionally, when the Vulcan seemed roused, Kirk called his name softly, but he did not respond either to his name or the voice. Kirk sighed. He was patient. He knew Spock had a high instinct for survival, even over a desolation as deep as this. He had no doubts that the Vulcan would recover.

Finally, there was movement in his arms. It was Spock coming back from the dead.

Kirk spoke his name.

In a daze, the Vulcan pulled away from Kirk's hold, struggling and crawling to free himself from his stifling prison. He crawled on his hands and knees, then slowly staggered to his feet swaying and lurching like a wounded animal. Off balance he reeled twice but steadied himself



with his hand against a wall. He stood there hunched over, gasping for breath.

It was hard for Kirk to watch. He was totally unused to seeing Spock move so awkwardly. The Vulcan's body had always seemed an extension of his well-ordered mind, all movements graceful and efficient. Now he was reduced to the strained, retching figure that stood upright only with the help of the wall.

"Spock, you did what you thought was best for me. No one can blame you." The Captain's voice was comforting. "You're going to be all right." He watched closely as Spock leaned back with his full weight against the wall. He stood facing the Captain and the look on his face indicated he had heard his words.

With great effort the old man struggled to his feet. He wished Spock were in better condition to help him, for it seemed to him that every joint in his body was locked stiffly in place. A table steadied him for the time it took his circulation to improve.

"There, you see, we're both all right." He smiled bravely at Spock.

Spock seemed to breathe more easily and to relax. There were deep valleys in his face and ugly shadows under his eyes, but each passing minute gave him more strength.

Across the room the Ambrobody lay broken in a heap, like so much refuse. Kirk felt himself strangely drawn to it. He would go to look one more time.

Like a man whose shoes were filled with weights, he slowly shuffled to it in short sluggish steps. As if to pay a last tribute, he stooped down on one knee and took a limp hand in his own. The familiar form was strange and lovely.

The body emanated no movement, no pulse, no life, only barren silence, broken briefly by a small sound when the hand dropped back to the floor.

His voice cracking with emotion, he turned to Spock and said simply, "I'm so sorry."

For the Vulcan, it was almost too much to bear. To shut out the scene, he closed his eyes tightly for a moment and walked slowly toward the exit. He wanted desperately to get away.

Silently, the door opened and he stood there a minute like a lost child. Was he still expected to take control of the situation? Was he free to walk away and never look back, or

was it still his duty to take care of the old man even if it meant spending his last breath? Gathering all his strength, he turned and held out his hand.

"Captain, let me take you home," he said, taking command. It saddened him greatly to know that the Captain would never see Earth again.

Kirk nodded in acceptance...of everything.

The corridors were curiously empty as they walked together back to their quarters. No peering eyes peeked out, as the two old men crept silently by. Perhaps the hallways had been cleared for their privacy, or perhaps it was simply that each saw no one but the other.

VII.

As per earlier arrangements by Ambassador Thompson, another chartered ship was waiting to take the two men aboard. This last trip would have taken them to Kirk's quarters on Starbase Nine; instead it had been rerouted back to Earth, the Captain's home planet.

Their quarters were once again austere but three times larger than they had previously. The L-shaped room contained Kirk's bed at one end of the L, a bed for Spock at the other end, and a conference table and chairs at the angle. Spock was grateful for the small amount of space he had by his bed, where he could not be seen by Kirk. He felt himself practically craving privacy, and yet he could not afford to place himself too far from the Captain's bedside.

Spock spent the first two days virtually alone as Captain Kirk slept hours at a time. The trip to Vitalis IV and its conclusion had been exhausting for the old man. What little strength he had left must be gathered and reconstituted through rest. Though resigned to his impending death, he had no wish to give up.

Barely one hour before Spock himself would prepare to go to sleep, the old man awakened. He was quite lucid and understood exactly where he was.

"Spock, you there?"

The Vulcan was immediately at his side.

Kirk smiled wistfully. "We're on our way back to Earth?"

"Yes, sir. I estimate our arrival in--"

"Never mind," Kirk said sadly. "It doesn't matter. What does matter is you. Are you all right?"

"Yes, Captain, of course."

Kirk looked agitated. "I mean are you really all right?"

Spock sighed and looked at the floor. He knew perfectly well that Kirk's reference was to his emotional health.

"I shall recover in full."

"Oh, you'll survive, I know that. Nothing can keep you down for long...Back there on Vitalis IV, you took this pretty hard. I understand your reasons for everything you did. They were good reasons. You were motivated by the best intentions..."

Spock shook his head resolutely.

"No, Captain. Don't you see? You were completely right. Everything I did was done out of emotion for you. I lied to myself. I told myself it was logical when it was not. I couldn't see the obvious, that the entire exercise was futile, doomed. Dr. McCoy tried to warn me. I refused to listen."

"I don't care, Spock. Your reasons were generous and noble. You were trying to save my life. I wish you could have." He stopped to catch his breath. "I have no regrets regarding my life, except one."

Spock raised his head.

"Sir?"

"Having to leave you." The Admiral was unashamed to admit his obvious feelings. "Our friendship has been glorious, Spock. I don't want it to die with me. I want it to continue."

"It shall continue as long as I live, Captain."

Spock was miserable, weary and cheerless. He sat on a small bench next to Kirk's bed with both elbows on his knees, his chin and folded hands meeting. His two index fingers were extended, the tips touching the end of his nose. He carefully avoided eye contact with Kirk while they were speaking. In control of his emotions now, he feared the control was limited. Deliberately, his fingertips slid down to rest against his lips. He did not want to speak and yet he felt he must.

"Captain, may I tell you something personal?"

Kirk was pleased that Spock would not consider such an action.

"Of course, Spock. I'm listening."

"Captain Kirk, for all the years I served under your command, my basic behavioral premise did not change, that is: a logical and non-emotional attitude is superior."

Kirk smiled to himself as he remembered the past.

"Yes, yes, I recall the little tiffs you and McCoy used to have about that very subject." Spock's expression was sober. "Go on, Mr. Spock."

"I respected you because you could be rational, more rational than any other human I have known. I considered your emotions simply as one of your weaknesses. I used to wonder why you would sometimes side with Dr. McCoy when that only encouraged his emotional outbursts. I would wonder why you

would sometimes take his advice over mine when mine consisted of exact readings with no chance for error. I also wondered why you did not try to rid yourself of these inferior feelings and predispositions. I don't mean to brag, Captain, but I felt that my example to you as a superior individual was more than sufficient to warrant at least an attempt by you to change.

"I see now that logic and emotion work together for you because you are human. And to be human means to be both logical and illogical. You, Captain Kirk, would never fight what you are. It is illogical to deny one's true nature."

Kirk was puzzled.

"What are you getting at, Spock?"

Spock lifted his eyes. "What I am getting at is that I, too, am human."

"Only half."

Spock was resolute.

"Half is a great amount of one's total. All my life I have denied this heritage, denied what I am. I accepted only Vulcan heritage, only Vulcan philosophy. I felt ashamed, humiliated if I appeared or acted even slightly 'human'. You know that better than anyone, Captain. Instead of being the example to you, I should have understood your example to me. You are proof that emotion and logic can function successfully."

Stunned, Kirk could not believe what he had just been told.

"Spock, after all these years, you're finally going to change?"

Spock hung his head.

"I cannot change, Jim."

The old man became flustered.

"But you just said it is illogical to deny one's nature."

A look of weariness crossed Spock's face, then disappeared.

"Most Vulcans," he continued, "forget that they do have emotions which are controlled, subjugated to our wills." He hesitated to say it, then added, "Even repressed, as Dr. McCoy always said."

"At the age of seven I accepted the Vulcan way as my own, the one true philosophy I would follow throughout my life. At that time, I rejected my human side with all attributes of being

human, both good and bad. Now I accept my duality, but I cannot change."

Kirk grew indignant.

"Why not?" he demanded.

Spock's whole body tensed.

"I want you to know precisely how I feel..." Even that was hard to say. "I am an observer, Captain. That was my duty as Science Officer aboard the ENTERPRISE. Looking back, I observe that perhaps my life would have been richer if I had allowed my human side to emerge."

Kirk's indignation quickly subsided. Suddenly, it occurred to him that his relationship to this man had changed, evolved into something else. No longer was it brother to brother, but more like father and son. How strange the feeling, how special these last words must be.

I know him, Kirk considered, I know him all too well. I am the last person he'll ever confide in. I owe him and owe him again. If I could only help him make peace with himself, this would all be worthwhile.

Before he spoke, he chose his words carefully. His voice was gentle with understanding.

"For years, Spock," he began, "I've watched you walk the thin line between two separate worlds. Always alone and always in conflict with yourself. And yet, in all this time, until now, I've seldom seen you stumble and rarely been privy to your pain. Why, Spock?" His pale eyes pleaded, as much as his voice. "Why do you do it? There has to be some middle ground that you can live with. There just has to be. Why go on when you can't ever win?" He shot a cognizant glance at the Vulcan. "Or is it just your stubborn pride?"

Spock straightened in his seat, the expression on his face so neutral as to be unreadable. He stared dead ahead like a soldier at attention.

"It is true, Captain," he stated, "I am proud. I pray that my pride has nothing whatsoever to do with being stubborn. It is such a simple thing, really."

Kirk stared hard at him, aching to comprehend.

Spock turned his head in the old man's direction. The sight of deep wrinkles and grey hair convinced him of his words.

"There is no way I can ever go back, Jim, to start over. I am what I am. I am Vulcan."

For a moment, there was complete silence. Then, Kirk asked gently, "Has it been terribly lonely for you, Spock?"

"Lonely?" The Vulcan took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Spock, the Vulcan, rejects that word. However, the human Spock cannot. Loneliness is here with me, Captain, from my first memories of life on Vulcan. I remember wanting, yes, desiring to go to my mother, to tell her I loved her. I never did."

"Ever?"

"No, never. I did love her. But I think if she were here now in front of me...as much as I would want to say it, I would not be able to."

Kirk wanted to reach out and touch Spock, to comfort him somehow. He knew how difficult it was for Spock to open up to a human, to anyone this way. Spock was reaching out to him for help, but to comfort the Vulcan was impossible. Both men knew that.

Kirk felt bitter frustration.

"I think I understand," was all he could say.

"Thank you, Captain," Spock rose slowly. "That is as much as I can ever hope for."

The air in the room seemed heavy and oppressive.

"It's late, isn't it?" the Captain asked.

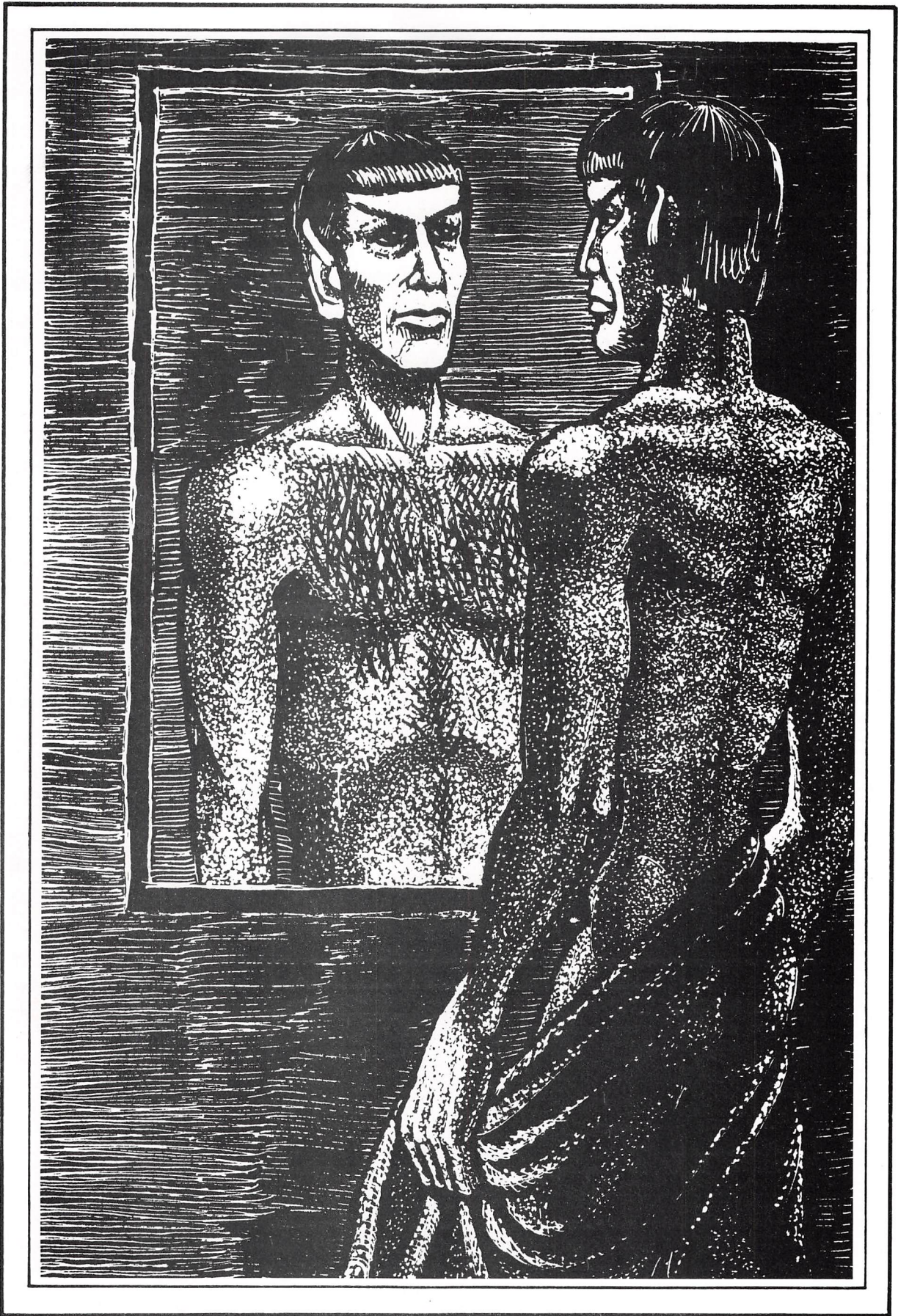
"Yes. Go to sleep now. I can give you a sedative, if you need it."

"That won't be necessary, Spock." The old man shook his head and resolved to try to sleep. He was incredibly tired, maybe of living, he thought to himself.

Spock watched him until he was reasonably sure the Captain had drifted off. He waited until Kirk's breathing was slow and even, then he went quietly to his own sleeping area. Sitting on his bed, he began to undress.

Across the room on the wall he could see a narrow, full-length mirror. Mirrors held no particular fascination to him in general; he used them only once in the morning to check his dress before reporting to his duties. Suddenly he felt a compulsion, a subconscious need, to peer into this one. He approached it cautiously, as if it were an alien lifeform.

Vulcans have no infatuation with their own images. They are a handsome race, endowed naturally with the striking features some peoples strive to induce by hand. Vulcan philosophy



emphasizes self-awareness, and this is generally acquired by introspective investigation from the inside organs, muscles and tissue to the outside skin. A Vulcan knows his own personal body as well as he knows all ramifications of Vulcan philosophy.

Spock stood before the mirror peering directly into it, studying himself. He tried to look at his own face as though he had never seen it before. The most dominate feature was the ears, shell-shaped like humans, but ending (or beginning) in the soaring point at the top. The eyes were small and dark and topped with a pair of striking eyebrows that winged out and up. The nose was straight and true, the lips narrow. All of this was capped by jet-black hair, cut short with bangs almost to the eyebrows.

What is it that Captain Kirk sees when he looks at me, he thought. He knew Kirk saw that which had barely changed in countless years while the Captain's own features had deteriorated from bright youth to extreme old age. For Kirk and for the Vulcan, it was a heart breaking comparison.

As he was shirtless, Spock's eyes carefully inspected his shoulders and chest for...for what? What did he expect to find....a flaw? What kind? He touched the place on his upper chest near his right shoulder where a scar would have been had it not been for Dr. McCoy's skillful reconstructive surgery. He knew there was another place on his back where a scar should have been.

In truth, there were no scars on his body at all, no deformities, no blemishes, nothing to mar the tall, lean yet muscular figure who studied himself intently. His looks were ageless, neither youth nor middle-aged. If his physique could be described, in a word, it would be "sleek", like the elegant, efficient thoroughbred racehorses of Earth.

With curiosity, he stepped back to gather a full view of the reflected figure in the mirror. He gazed intently at the whole person and at each detail with the eyes of a total stranger. What he saw was the same image he had seen for decades--himself, Spock the Vulcan-born, half-breed son of Sarek of Vulcan and Amanda Grayson of Earth. Why was it that everyone who ever mattered to him had changed, either aged or died, that is, everyone except himself?

Since childhood, he had felt alienation from those around him and now, once again, he felt alone, seperated from the dying human Kirk because of determining factors like where he was born, who his parents were, factors totally out of his control. Born millions of miles apart and raised in two radically dissimilar cultures, later in life he and Kirk were thrown together like so many peas and carrots in a stew and were now being parted violently by simple biological genes.

Neither age nor experience had prepared him for this realization.

Spock turned away, a hint of bitterness coloring his thoughts. He thought of Christopher Pike, his first commanding officer on the ENTERPRISE, then James Kirk, who followed him, then all the other brave captains who followed them, each bolder than the previous one, each building on the last man's work...He could always go back to Starfleet. He could easily regain his full Commander status, but for what? He shook his head knowing full well he would not reapply to Starfleet, never serve under another man, never let himself get close to any of their kind again.

The bed and sleep were a veritable haven for the night, and his body fell face forward hungrily on to the bed, devouring the softness and silence like a starving outcast. In a matter of seconds, sleep grabbed him and pulled him deep inside itself, covering the gaping wound of a man for a few hours. He slept fitfully, constantly dreaming, but at least, he slept.

For a starship captain, Death is the companion of the unknown. To explore the unknown is his duty and the farther he explores the more he meets Death head-on, for his crew, his friends, himself. But for an old man living the rewards of past glories, Death comes in thoughts and in dread but not face to face until the very end.

There was a dull stillness in the room, and Kirk knew it. His body lay incapacitated, and he fathomed this dread calm was not just silence but an awful stagnation like no other he had ever felt. He coughed. His chest rebelled in anger and the pain shot up and down his arms and legs like the thousand racing comets he had seen fly across the sky. Sweat poured from his body in torrents, and his poor fragile heart ran frantically on, starting and stopping in confusion or indecision as to whether it wanted to give up and die or kill itself trying to live. A flash of panic gripped him.

Where was Spock? The old man's eyes saw nothing but empty space. Terrified of dying alone, his mouth attempted to form the word and call out. His mind could see the face and say the word, but no sound emerged from his several attempts, and exhaustion set in rapidly and with complete thoroughness. Where was Spock? Had something happened to him? Spock! Kirk's mind screamed the word.

An hour later, the Vulcan's consciousness surfaced. He rolled over on his back and lay exhausted and drained. Though he slept the entire night, it had not been tranquilly, nor could

he remember the last time his mind was at peace. He dragged himself out of bed, guilt plaguing the back of his thoughts.

Dressing quickly, he immediately went to Kirk's bedside. The old man was still, unnaturally quiet, with closed eyes and pale cheeks. Spock placed his hand on a sunken shoulder.

At the touch, Kirk's eyes opened in surprise.

"Spock!" His voice was nothing more than a croak. "You're all right!"

Spock was startled, though his features did not betray him.

"Obviously, Captain."

"I called and called your name..."

"I am sorry. I was asleep. I did not hear you call." How could he sleep while the Captain called his name? He did not understand how this could happen. He was shocked with himself.

"I thought something had happened to you," Kirk said. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Quite sure."

At this reassurance, Kirk seemed to go limp with relief. The adrenalin which had been pumping furiously in his veins suddenly shut itself off. The pain that was forgotten returned and with it a terrible debilitating weakness. In a matter of seconds, he could feel himself slipping into unconsciousness.

"You must rest now, Captain," Spock said with grave concern.

Valiently, the old man tried to fight the suggestion, but failed. His mind and body were pulled into darkness like a sailing ship swallowed whole by the sea.

For the next several hours, the Vulcan sat waiting patiently, waiting for death or some signs of life. With each passing hour, Kirk's breathing had become more labored and painful. Spock had heard the sound before with other men and recognized it immediately.

He sighed softly and placed his chair a little closer to the prostrate figure. In his heart of hearts, he realized that this was the way it was all meant to be, meant to end. Instead of feeling out of place and disbelieving, he felt more certain and at ease with his duties now than for all the weeks he left Kirk behind to make the Vitalis IV arrangements. Nothing could force him to leave Kirk's side. Intrinsic loyalty committed him to the end.

When the Captain stirred again, Spock was amazed by his strength. Kirk's old face showed the strain plainly and his hands trembled out of control, but his determination to speak again was apparent and nothing would deter him, neither pain nor despair.

"Spock, you still there?" Kirk's eyesight had all but failed.

The Vulcan took his trembling hand. "I am here, Jim."

"What's happening here? Where am I?" Kirk was very much afraid.

"You must relax, Jim."

"I'm dying, aren't I, Spock? Right now, I'm dying?"

"Yes, Captain."

Was it really happening? Was it really happening like this, now? After all the preparation, after all the plans for life, James Kirk was dying right now halfway between Vitalis IV and Earth, in the blackness of space, in the unfamiliar quarters of a small chartered ship. Was this the place for a high ranking Federation Admiral to spend his last hours, out in the middle of nowhere?

Spock wanted to scream out something about it not being fair, then caught himself abruptly. Leonard McCoy's face flashed in front of his eyes, and he could hear himself repeat, "It has nothing to do with fairness, Doctor..." If he had only understood then, as Dr. McCoy did, the hopelessness of placing Jim Kirk in this impossible situation.

What's done is done, he reasoned, and to blame myself for what has already happened is illogical and self-defeating. But what exactly does the hear and now have to do with logic?

The old man's grip tore him away from his private thoughts.

"I am here, Jim," he heard himself say.

"You won't leave me..."

"Of course I won't leave you."

Little by little, terrible tingling sensations saturated Kirk's whole body as his nervous system started to collapse. He could feel his brain gently slipping back and forth, in and out of focus like an old-time camera. All the images of the past slipped and slid through his mind, except one--Spock. The image of the man who sat loyally beside him was sharp and clear. Somehow the others--his great starship, his wife, his children,

dissolved away in a fog, leaving the being called Spock his last concern.

I'm dying, he thought. I'm dying right now...

He realized in a few minutes, perhaps an hour at the longest his friend would be truly alone. How badly Spock would take his death he did not really comprehend, but he did remember vividly Spock's breakdown over the rejection of the Ambrobody on Vitalis IV. He remembered himself watching bitterly as the entire scene progressed and hating himself for his impotence and weakness. Would Spock react as he did back there? Kirk had visions of the Vulcan going mad or sinking into a melancholia so deep he could not recover. Extreme agitation gripped the failing old man, and he felt himself becoming more upset and fearful by the minute.

Spock felt it, too. He grabbed Kirk by both hands in an attempt to calm him.

"I can't do it, Spock. I can't leave you alone like this..." His eyes were wild. "Bones," he shouted, "Bones, help him!"

"Captain, Dr. McCoy is not here." Taking both Kirk's shoulders, he held him down.

Kirk was virtually out of his head with worry. "I can't die now. You'll be alone, so alone..." He struggled in Spock's arms.

Spock knew there was one choice to be made. Only the Captain's complete dementia forced him, compelled him to such an extreme decision. He had done this once before, many years ago--that time to help his Captain face the loss of a beloved woman--this time to help him die in peace. The Vulcan was both calm and determined as he prepared to use it now.

Carefully, he leaned close to Kirk and positioned his fingers at the old man's temples. The Vulcan's head was only inches from Kirk's and the look on his face was both fierce and compassionate.

At first his concentration was broken by Kirk's struggling, but in seconds his mind became stronger than the old man's body, and Kirk soon stopped his movements and stiffened. Vulcan fingers locked tighter to Kirk's temples and the Captain's eyes blinked in panic.

Abruptly, Spock's eyes widened. He almost lost his concentration. For a moment he saw it. He chose to see it.

He could see chaos. He could see it and feel it. The



sensation was terrible, like a thousand separate drums beating rhythms in his brain. The waves of Kirk's emotions battered him so completely he almost lost his balance. He wanted to fling himself away and hid, but he could not. He was committed.

Kirk's brain swam in fear. Total, immense fear and deep dread.

Their minds touched and blended, their thoughts melting into one stream, diverting into one river, flowing into one ocean of thought and thoughts. Faster and faster whirling waters of emotion, sweeping whirlpools of fear and dread and guilt. Spock could hardly contain it. The maelstrom of another man's mind engulfed him and almost pulled all control from him. The force and struggle made him shudder and retch. He could feel it so deeply it was like a fire raging in his very bowels. His fingers tightened their terrible grip. The old man shivered in terror.

Spock saw it, saw it, felt it...felt the fear. When he spoke it was the voice of their two minds speaking as one. It was his voice and Kirk's voice, his mind and Kirk's mind, no longer separate, but merged, one and one completely. His lips worked to make the words. "I am dying, I am dying..." Suddenly,

there were images of someone screaming. "Don't die! I don't want to die, don't let me die, don't they die? Don't Vulcans die too?" Screams of someone in hideous pain. "Spock, my friend, I'm so tired..." The screams receded. "Forget, Jim... forget, Jim. Die in peace, in peace. Forget your fear... we are friends, we always will be. Die in peace. I promise you, my Captain--I WILL SURVIVE...die in peace..."

Instantaneously, the Vulcan's mind broke the meld.

Silence stole into the room like a hot wind. It burned through Kirk's body like a cleansing fire and it burned through Spock's mind until even the echoes of chaos were gone. Limply, the Captain laid in Spock's hands and gently the Vulcan released him on to the bed, then fell back on to his own bench in exhaustion.

Kirk's face relaxed. It took on a look Spock had not seen for weeks. The pain seemed to be gone. All that was left was soft, gentle breathing and darkness.

Spock sat out of touch with all reality except the breathing. It was done and all that was left to do was wait. He tried to think. It was impossible. Sweat made his tunic stick to his chest and back, and he wanted to tear it off and throw it aside, declaring himself stripped and beaten, a failure. But somehow nothing mattered but the breathing.

It seemed to him that he had dreamt it all. It was quiet. Nothing was wrong. The Captain was sleeping. He knew the Captain was dead, but he could not make himself believe it. Finally, he touched the still warm hand and felt for a pulse. There was none.

For a moment, he buried his face in his hands, not knowing what to feel or what to do. Then he stood up, staggered and steadied himself. He walked across the room toward the intercom on the wall. Wearily, he pressed the button and waited for the response.

"Commander Roget here," the voice answered.

"This is Mr. Spock, Commander," he said, his voice cracking.

It seemed minutes before he could get his mouth to say it.

"Admiral Kirk has just died..." For a few seconds, the logic of the moment escaped him, then he said, "I respectfully request a temporary morgue be set up on the ship until we reach Earth."

There was an uneasy silence, then, "I'll send the ship's doctor right up."

Spock leaned heavily against the wall.

"Please, sir...Give me a few moments."

"Of course, Mr. Spock...Admiral Kirk was a great man. I am truly sorry."

Spock was devastated. He wanted to say something to the Commander, but even a simple "Spock out" was too much, and he pushed the button that disconnected them and said nothing.

Broken-hearted, the Vulcan trudged back to Kirk's still body. Carefully he folded the hands across the chest and smoothed the twisted strands of hair away from the face. He sat, not on the bench, but on the edge of the bed close to the Captain.

Patiently expecting the ship's doctor, the faithful old watchdog waited.

WATCHDOG

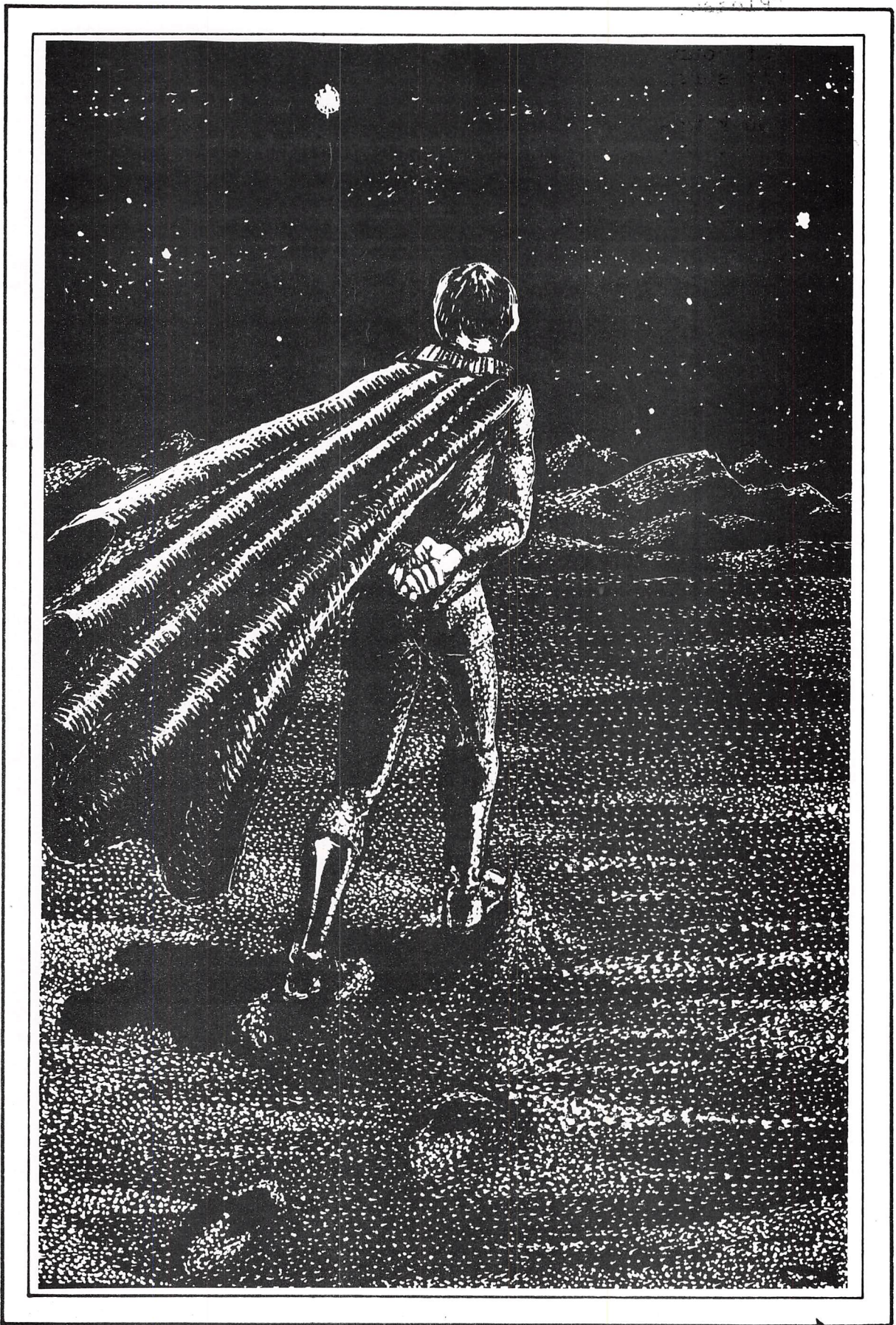
The faithful old watchdog waits
for the soft rain to green the valley
waits for the sun to lighten the sky
for the coming of the bright new day

The faithful old watchdog waits
for the shaping of many tomorrows
waits for the twinkling look in the eye
for the orders - clear spoken commands

The faithful old watchdog waits
for adventures exciting and bright
waits for new planets to conquer
for places not trodden before

The faithful old watchdog waits
for the dream soon coming true
waits for a young Captain to rise
for the black grim reaper to leave

The faithful old watchdog waits
for death to claim his great Admiral
and now the faithful old watchdog waits
alone



EPILOGUE

The funeral was impressive, with full military honors, not what Kirk would have approved of, but more than befitting a man of his rank and reputation. It was the largest funeral service ever held at Starfleet Academy. Dignitaries and friends from all over the galaxy were more than willing to stand three deep in places to pay last respects to one of their legends.

James T. Kirk was buried on a hillside in a family plot on the midwestern plains of Old America.

As with all men, Spock's life continued.

The science project on Rigel III soon began to dissatisfy him and he resigned from the project after three years as director to become an ambassador like his father before him. In later years, he was single-handedly responsible for the Kem-Malachi Accords and was awarded the United Worlds Peace Prize for his work.

He resided on Vulcan, taking a Vulcan wife there. She was exotic and completely logical and complemented him in all the ways a wife was expected to complement her husband. Their children were only one-quarter human and had little thought or understanding of this part of their father's life.

Spock rarely spoke, rarely had cause to speak, of the human Captain James Kirk that he loved as a brother. As he promised, he kept this spark of humanity alive in his heart for the rest of his days, and it was an exceptional morning that he failed to thank the Creator of All Things for the many years that he could say he had a friend, that he was not alone.

=====

CHEER TO THE ECHO

The drum beat long and loud
The procession moved quite slow
Hundreds of galaxy flags
bright colors halfway stood
Three deep they had to stand
respect to one of their legends
The sonic boom sounded out
Twenty one times over and over
Cheer to the Captain
Cheer to the Admiral
Cheer to the man
Cheer to the echo

